


Platonic Love and Brechtian Techniques in James Baldwin’s Plays: <i>The Amen Corner</i> and <i>Blues for Mister Charlie</i>			Literature
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Abstract			
<p>This article seeks to explore the way James Baldwin uses Platonic love and Brechtian techniques in his two plays, <i>The Amen Corner</i> (1968a) first performed in 1955, and <i>Blues for Mister Charlie</i> (1964a), to express his personal and racial concerns. It aims at demonstrating that Baldwin’s plays belong to the Western epic theatre at the level of form and are platonic at the level of content in their conception of love. <i>The Amen Corner</i> recalls in many aspects Plato’s dialogue <i>Symposium</i> (2008) in which the participants provide their definition of love by trying to displace, provoke, and collectively search for truth in a process of a dialogic interaction. His play <i>Blues for Mister Charlie</i> is not only a black church ritual, but it is written according to the Western epic theatrical tradition as designed by Bertolt Brecht.</p>			

Introduction

After the Second World War, experimental European drama as designed by great playwrights like Bertolt Brecht influenced the American and the African American theatre. However, some critics like Carlton W. Molette stipulate that Baldwin’s play, namely *The Amen Corner* “is more of a black church ritual than it is a play in the sense that modern Western culture defines a play” (1981, p. 184). Thus, the aim of this article is to show that contrary to Molette’s thesis, Baldwin’s plays, *The Amen Corner* and the *Blues for Mister Charlie*, are written according to Western literary paradigms both at the level of form and content. This is done by espousing Brecht’s techniques concerning epic theatre, and approaching the notion of love in the same way as Plato in his dialogue *Symposium*.

This article discusses Baldwin’s notion of love and the way he has tapped on Platonism and Brechtian theatrical techniques to write his plays which are, as his essays in “The Fire Next Time” (1985b), letters from his mind to his audience. In delivering his thoughts publicly, Baldwin supports the idea that the truth about love, either common or divine like any other truth, is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, but it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 109). This process of thinking and questioning through interaction, as it is argued, is the basic element of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre that informed the form of Baldwin’s drama. The characters of his plays are projections of his ideas. However, as demonstrated elsewhere in my thesis, the plays reflect many aspects of the Socratic dialogue as explained by Bakhtin (1984, p. 24). As dramas of the self, Baldwin states that his plays are inspired from his real life, and the religious atmosphere that characterizes the setting comes from the short time he spent in the church to escape the dangers of Harlem’s streets (1968b, p. xv).

James Baldwin and Plato

Sylvander W. (1980) affirms that Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* “is about love” (p. 184). However, she has failed to detect and specify that the same play reflects the notion of love as developed in Plato’s dialogue *Symposium* (2008). This was despite the fact that Baldwin himself has repeatedly alluded to it in his essay “The Fire Next” Time (1985b). In the latter, he writes that to love God is to love all his children without exception and to accept the enemy with love (p. 336). Though his words sound Christian, they directly refer to Socrates’ speech reporting Diotima in *Symposium*, saying that love is the ladder that helps to love all people, to reach to the soul rather than the body without excluding it, and to acquire ultimate knowledge and wisdom (Plato, 2008, p. 50).

Baldwin has been influenced by Plato and his student, Aristotle, who participated with their insightful works in constructing the Western philosophical tradition and culture. They are the philosophical references that appeared during the classical/Greek age and their pioneering works on the subjects that surround human life still influence and inspire generations of thinkers after them. In the same context, John M. Cooper (1997) writes that “even after Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire, Platonism continued as the dominant philosophy in the Greek speaking Mediterranean” (p.ii).

Price A.W. (1989) affirms that Platonic love is often associated with the desire of absolute knowledge to reach divinity, a conception of love that goes beyond the physical gratifications as an ultimate goal, without excluding it as a possible element among these ones since the object of love must have the beauty of mental promise (p. 17). Love has been thoroughly discussed in Plato’s two dialogues, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, and is also mentioned in his other works like *The Republic*. This present article discusses Baldwin’s use of Plato’s *Symposium*, the dialogue in which many male speakers discussed the definition of love ranging from earthly love in the Dionysian spirit as held by Aristophanes and Alcibiades to the divine one that comes after a great knowledge accumulated in a life characterized by toiling and a perpetuate search for the truth. It is a quest that attempts to answer the question of “what, whom, one’s desires”, and that quietly determines “the choices one makes and thereby affects one’s chances of leading a worthwhile and happy life” (Plato, 2008, p. 51).

Plato’s *Symposium* which “is particularly a dramatic form” (Howatson, 2008, p. vii) is at the basis a drinking party made to honor the victory of Agathon (2) in the contest of the best tragedy, which is celebrated each year for the god Dionysos (3). The dialogue includes seven speakers: Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates (Diotima), and Alcibiades delivering a speech about the subject of love (eros). Each speaker attempts to juxtapose his own discourse with other’s speech in an attempt to surpass it. However, at the same time, they participated in a discussion that ends up with Socrates’s definition of love, in a dialectic that clearly renders the nature of the Socratic dialogue.

Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* is a kind of religious symposium in which Margaret Alexander preaches with great fervor her great love for the Christian God. The characters comprises of Margaret’s son, David; his father, Luke; and Margaret’s sister, Odessa. Also, the sisters and the brothers of the congregation are ideologists having their own perception of love that often echoes the platonic tradition as explained in *Symposium*. They try to reconcile the antagonism of religious and earthly love that constitutes the most important theme of Baldwin’s fictional and non-fictional writings which render his Platonist vision. Written using epic conventions, *The Amen Corner* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* questioned the religious love intended to subjugate African Americans to the principles of the Christian love. This according to Baldwin are “blindness, loneliness and terror”, and to bow to “the white God”, whose justice Baldwin questioned in his writing that, “if His love was so great, and if He loved all his children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far, Why?” (1985b, p. 344). Baldwin looks for the notion of justice which, according to Plato’s dialogue, is one of the fourth cardinals of love together with moderation, courage, and wisdom. Throughout his plays, he explores love/agape to be felt and understood in the Christian church first, among the black people. He discusses God’s love for the mortals and people’s love for non-human things like honors, wealth, or God by framing his ideas according to Plato’s notion of love.

The main character in *The Amen Corner* is a fervent woman preacher called Margaret Alexander who, like Plato’s Diotima in *The Symposium*, plays the role of the instructress of Christian love to her congregation. She has known different forms of love, ranging from her love to her husband, her love for her son and sister, and her love for the Lord and her congregation. She thinks that her great love for her musician husband, Luke (common love), ceased after the death of her baby girl. As a result, she left her marital home and her husband to the North accompanied by her son and sister. Margaret devoted herself to the Christian love, and her passion for the Holy Ghost in the church trying to raise her son according to the Lord’s rightful path. However, behind her

pure love and holiness lies her secret love story she has distorted, telling others that she has chosen the love of Jesus because Luke her husband was sinful and had abandoned her. This story is the same as Baldwin's mother who came from the South refusing to reveal the real name of her Southern husband to Baldwin who desperately longed to know his real father (Campbell, 1996, p. 3).

In Baldwin's play, Margaret's enigmatic story about her life in the South has been clarified after Luke's sudden coming. His entrance to the church sounds like Alcibiades' in Plato's *Symposium*, who disturbs the order with his Dionysian temper. Alcibiades' arrival tersely alters the philosophical mood left from Diotima's speech. This entrance does not only shift the mood of the banquet of philosophy, but it shows that Alcibiades' speech is different from the other speeches in the sense that while the first five speeches contradicted each other and were reconciled in Diotima's speech, Alcibiades' changes the topic of the conversation from praising Eros to praising Socrates, "the truly superhuman" (Plato, 2008, p. 58) who started as a lover and ended up as the beloved of those who approached and listened to him.

In the same way, Luke enters the church and counterattacks the religious views of Margaret about the nature of love all along the play, forcing her to reveal the deepest layers of her personality and thoughts. He succeeds to move the audience's attention from the love of the Lord to his love for Margaret. Their dialogue starts in calm and teasing tone, yet it turns into a quarrel when Luke incites her to acknowledge their love and happiness before devoting her life to the love of the Lord:

Margaret: How long are you going to be in New York, Luke? When did you get here?
Nobody told me.

Luke: A couple of weeks ago. I figured I'd find you somewhere near a church. Are you a pastor now? Well, I guess it suits you. She is a good pastor?

Sister Moore: Amen!

Luke: What do you think David? Well she sure used to keep on at me about my soul. Didn't you, Maggie? Of course, that was only towards the end, when things got so rough. In the beginning...well, it's always different in the beginning.

Margaret: You ain't changed, have you? You still got the same carnal grin, that same carnal mind...you ain't changed a bit.

Luke: People don't change much, Maggie...

Margaret: Not unless the lord changes their hearts... (p. 28)

"Carnal grin and carnal mind" recalls Pausanias' speech in *Symposium* declaring that there are two kinds of Love: inferior/common and a heavenly one. He explains that while the first is more sexual between males and females, thus more attached to the body, the second one is purely between males, more preoccupied by the mind and the soul. He views physical love not to be constant because the body is not constant, while the heavenly one compels the lover to aspire to excellence by making oneself better in wisdom (Plato, 2008, p. 13). In the play, "carnal mind" also sounds as Margaret's reproach for Luke, referring to the sinful erotic love he indulges in and which she herself struggles against as a sanctified Christian. For her, it is only the love of the Lord that can save people from their worldly tempting demons, affirming:

Margaret: I had to go. The Lord told me to go. We'd been living like ...like two animals, like two children, never thought of nothing but their own pleasure. In my heart, I always knew we couldn't go on like that...we was too happy (p. 59).

Baldwin's projection of ideas concerning love is rendered through the different often combative views of his characters who are also inspired from his real life, (David is the real name of his father and of his elder brother who left the house). He explains that by the time he was writing the play, he was old enough to understand the dues paid by his father and the reasons that pushed him to be terrified concerning his son's future in a racist society, writing: "I am old enough by now at last to know that I had loved him and wanted him to love me. I could see that the battle we had fought had been dictated by the fact that our temperaments were fatally the same" (Baldwin, 1968b: xv). Luke represents the idea of Baldwin's absent father and this is the part of himself that desperately looks for his father's love and recognition by attempting to challenge his paternal and religious authority through his objective of being a better and successful preacher than him (Baldwin, 1985b, p. 347). Further, his desire to free himself from the control of the church to which he escapes out of terror is represented in the *The Amen Corner* by David's escape from both the church and his mother's influence, to follow a musical career.

Luke's and Margaret's dialogue about love becomes antagonistic when Luke forces Margaret to confess in front of her son, David and the church members, that she is the one who left the marital home and not as she tells everybody, that it is Luke who abandoned them. This confession is detrimental to her status of a pure sanctified priestess who preaches to her son and all the members of her congregation to tell the truth because "God don't like Liars" (p. 30). From this critical moment on, the members of the church doubt and openly criticize her authority and credibility as a pastor. This was as suggested in the words of Brother Boxer who says, "she been going around all these years acting so pure...she is always up there on that mountain, don't you know, just a-chewing the fat with the Lord...how come she thinks she can rule a church when she can't rule her own house" (p. 35).

Margaret sacrifices her real/earthly love to the love of God for the sake of curing her guilty and tormented spirit caused by abandoning her husband and marital house. This idea echoes the one developed by Eryximachus, the third speaker in Plato's *Symposium* saying that, "all the ways in which gods and men have dealings with one another – are entirely concerned with either the safeguarding or the cure of love" (p. 21). She tries to conquer reality through the religious illusion of loving the Holy Ghost and preaching, wishing that this invisible love can satisfy all her needs and cure her discontent. However, and unlike Eryximachus who instructs the other speakers that love must reconcile the most hostile elements in the body, make them love one another, gives all happiness, and finds fulfilment in company with temperance, justice whether on earth or among the gods (p. 19). Margaret has acted unjustly, neglects earthly love, and frustrates her husband and her son by preventing them from living in complete love and happiness. Ironically, her often cited passage from the Bible that says "set thine house in order" (p.8) is completely disregarded by her who strives to rule over a congregation when her own house is dismantled.

Margaret's (mistaken) sense of self-sacrifice also recalls Phaedrus's speech praising the lover's self-sacrifice in front of his beloved by introducing the idea that love leads to virtuous actions concluding that "the lover has a god within himself and he is more akin to the divine than the beloved" (p.11). This applies to Margaret's public preaching and sense of martyrdom thinking that sacrificing her love for her husband and family secures a privileged place with the Lord, saying that, "the Word say if you put father or mother or brother or sister or husband...or anybody...ahead of Him, He ain't going to have nothing to do with you on the last day" (p. 68). However, at the end, she expresses regrets for this sacrifice and wishes to start her life again with her husband, "my Lord! If I could only start again!" (p. 88).

Luke, the name Baldwin has given to Margaret's husband, refers to one of the evangelist writers of the *New Testament* appearing in two parts; first, as *The Gospel According to Luke* and second, as *Luke-Acts*. Yet, in the play, Luke ironically represents the 'prodigal' father who follows the career of a jazz man 'on the road', whom Baldwin portrays as a Dionysian disciple who acts as a fallen person in the eyes of his wife and the Christian church. Becoming deathly sick, Luke succeeded to find his family and declared his love to Margaret who pretended to understand nothing.

Contrary to Margaret who loves the Lord excluding any physical relationship with others, Luke believes in love between humans. He explains to his wife and son that looking for spiritual thing only is not sufficient to satisfy humans' desires. Like Aristophanes in Plato's banquet of love who parodies Eryximachus' speech by resorting to myth of "the two halves" rather than science, Luke parodies the religious love that encourages hypocrisy and lies by overtly denying the authority of the Holy Ghost. He tells Margaret, "I remember you when you didn't hardly know if the Holy Ghost was something to drink or something to put on your hair...Maggie, we are everything to each other, like that Bible of yours say, we are one flesh." (p. 59).

In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes starts by celebrating Aphrodite and Dionysus, by giving great tribute to erotic love, wine, and drunkenness since they are the major themes in Greek comedies that descended from the satyr. He explains that human beings were round-shaped with four hands and four legs each, two faces, and two sets of sexual organs. Tempted by their strength, they attacked the gods. Thus, Zeus and the other gods decided to cut them into halves to weaken their strength. Aristophanes ends his speech concluding that "love is the two halves' desire and pursuit of the whole" (p. 26).

Luke's only desire is to be reunited with Margaret as conveyed in his dialogue trying to make her remember their past life together. He forces her to recognize her mistake and accept change instead of pretending to have "a new mind". However, she explains to him exactly the same way she addresses her congregation that his stubbornness comes from the sinful Adam that lies inside him:

Margaret: I want you to learn one thing, the Love of Jesus.

Luke: Your tune has changed a whole lot. That is not what we were trying to learn from the beginning.

Margaret: The beginning was a long time ago. And we were nothing, but foolish then. Nothing, but the love of God can save your soul.

Luke: I know we can go back, Maggie. But you mean that whole time we were together even with all our trouble, you mean it doesn't meant anything to you now? You mean... you don't remember? I was your man.

Margaret: You still got that old sinful Adam in you. You are thinking with Adam's mind. You don't understand that when the Lord changes you, He makes you a new person and He gives you a new mind?

Luke: Don't talk to me like I am in a congregation. I don't belong to any congregation. I am your husband, even if I am not much good to you anymore (p. 58).

Furthermore, Luke explains to his son, David, who was passionate about music as an absolute quest to be noble as a young man like him if he desires it. Yet, music is not enough because human needs others' love and compassion to be happy and to feel alive, saying to him:

Luke: Music is a moment, but life is a long time. In that moment when it's good, when you really swinging ...then you joined to everything, to everybody, to skies, stars, and every other living thing. But music is not kissing. Kissing is what you want to do. The question is how

long can you keep up with the music when you have nobody to kiss. You know music don't come out of the air, baby. It comes out of the man who is blowing it. (p. 44).

Luke thinks that human love is the first rung in the ascent to other beautiful forms of knowledge like music. By echoing Socrates's (Diotima's) view that love is a helper, a kind of ladder that permits the ascension from the common beauties of this world to the original forms of beauty, the last rung of the ladder makes one a "lover of wisdom, or a philosopher" (p. 49). Further, Luke who fully lived the life of a musician "on the road", believing in the platonic view of making one part with the universe by blowing his music, has always felt incomplete because he needs the love of his wife and son to renew his melodies. However, and at the same time, he cannot erase and leave his past life and live with them as a religious disciple without playing his jazz music. So, when Margaret finally declares her love to him, he dies in her arms. On the one hand, this death symbolizes the impossibility of being Dionysus and Socrates at the same time. On the other hand, it executes the transformation of Margaret and her reconversion to human love. It is also a metaphor for Luke's rebirth through Margaret herself, completing Aristophanes' concept of wholeness which is not only physical/sexual since it embodies both the desire to reach excellent forms of virtuous and physical love. Therefore, this wholeness is shown at the end of the play when Margaret addresses the congregation, "still holding Luke's mouthpiece [a component of his musical instrument] clenched against her breast" (p. 87).

Margaret has not succeeded to forget her old carnal love, and acting as a virgin is in fact the role that had disappeared ceding place to her real love, "maybe, it's not possible to stop loving anybody you ever really loved" (P.86). Baldwin replicates Margaret's expressions in his prologue to the play. This is because in spite of her failure to reconcile religious and worldly love, she recognizes her weaknesses that permitted her to know the truth about her personality. He makes her confess and sum up her life directly facing the real listeners saying to them, "all these years have just been waiting for me to turn a corner, and there it stands, my whole life, just like I had never gone anywhere. It's an awful thing to think that love never dies!" (p. 81). He also repeats her saying, "to love the Lord is to love all his children...and suffer with them and rejoice with them, and to never count the cost!" (p. 88), in his notes. This is because he wants to focus on the importance of loving others without any form of distinction of color or class. This concluding notion about love directly refers to Agathon's speech in Plato's *Symposium* who affirms that love has four cardinal virtues of justice, moderation (the power over pleasures and passions), bravery, and wisdom. Furthermore, Agathon asserts that, "it is love that takes from us our sense of estrangement and fills us with a sense of kinship; that causes us to associate with one another" (p. 31).

Her son, David, to whom she planned the same religious career as herself from his childhood, and who plays piano during religious services, no longer believe in the Holy Ghost. Thus, he chooses to follow a musical career like his father, Luke, outside the walls of the church. He declares to her that he has a mission outside the walls of the church in the world stating: "I want to be a man...who's going to speak for all of us?...maybe I can say something...one day" (p. 80). After the death of her husband and her son's leaving, Margaret rejected the Holy Spirit, telling her sister Odessa that the vision was an illusion: "Oh sister, I don't remember any vision. I just remembered that it was dark and I was scared, and my baby was dead and I wanted Luke, I wanted Luke" (p. 81). Margaret has decided to follow a more virtuous love, an ideal/platonic one beyond the church's hypocrisy, without excluding the love of all humans. Therefore, she stated at the end of the play that "to love God is to love all his children" (p. 88).

It is worth mentioning here that Baldwin wrote this play before the Black Art Movement of the sixties to criticize the church and subvert the effectiveness of religion in the Civil Rights struggle. He made a direct reference to Martin Luther King's strategy based on religious love that proved to be utopian, between the white and black people. Furthermore, the play is Baldwin's trial of the self and of his (religious) love that changes at

different stages of the African American struggle for equality. The play is inspired from his real experience in the church as the son of a Harlem preacher and then a preacher himself. He left the church after discovering that it is “a mask of hatred and self-hatred” for black people and that it is an institution devoid of any kind of love stating that “there is no love in the church” (Baldwin, 1985b, p. 348). He denounces the hypocrisy and the falsehood of its rituals intended to love some people (white) and to hate others (blacks).

Margaret’s final definition of love, “to love all the children”, supports Baldwin’s views stated in his essay “The Fire Next Time” published in 1963. Therefore, this was when it was replicated in the theatre in front of an audience which constitutes a revolutionary tool inciting everyone to think and reconsider the way they love and if they respect the four cardinal pillars of justice, moderation, bravery, and wisdom that are initially stated in Plato’s *Symposium*. In love, Baldwin insists on justice because for him, “if love will not swing wide the gate, no other power will or can” (Baldwin, 1985b, p. 344). His characters are projections of the self and its different conceptions of love. He is Margaret (Phaedrus, Diotima) when he was a preacher, Luke (Alcibiades) after the church intoxication, and finally David (Socrates) who escapes the church and its hypocrisy following the path of art/knowledge (Music for David and writing for Baldwin). Thus, they have in mind the objective of saying something about their race and the philosophy of love.

James Baldwin and Brecht

The concept of love according to Plato’s *The Symposium* in *The Amen Corner* is further rationalized by Baldwin’s use of experimental techniques as designed by Bertolt Brecht who was one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century experimental theatre and the most significant theatrical practitioner since World War II (Rush, D., 2005: 242). Baldwin participated in the circle of the New Dramatist to explore his theatrical experimentation, and writing of plays. Thus, he declares it to be “another exercise” that he had to do as a writer after the success of his first novel *Go Tell it in the Mountain* (Baldwin, 1985a, p. 395). Baldwin has used Brechtian techniques in both plays. Nevertheless, it is in the second one *Blues for Mister Charlie* (1964a) that these techniques are clearly displayed.

The essence of Brecht’s epic theatre and its objectives can be applied to racist categories in post Second World War in America. This is because this kind of theatre can force the (white) audience to think and to question the social codes like racism and segregation for the sake of changing them. Baldwin was inspired by this Western theatre and his plays, as it will be argued in this section, render these experimental techniques to deflate Smollett’s above mentioned thesis that excludes Baldwin’s play from the Western stage. For Baldwin to be altered, white and black identities should first be confronted suggesting that, “if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: “that we with love should force our brothers to see themselves as they are to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it” (1985b, p. 336).

Brecht’s alienation effect revolutionizes Western drama since it displaces empathy that is derived from the catharsis of the Greek tragedy by the critical consciousness of the spectator who should question, think, and use his mind to create change rather than identify with a given situation or character. Brecht’s ideas originated in The Berlin Popular Cabarets of the 1930s that were characterized by *agit-pop* (agitation propaganda) and political songs (Rush, 2005, p. 243). Consequently, his theatre is called *epic* because of the use of a long narrative/story spanning many locations and time frames. On the other hand, the dialogue of the play often includes storytellers, songs, and narrators that initially pertain to classical drama, but the latter’s supernatural monsters are the social and economic circumstances that stand against the hero’s progress in Brecht’s theatre.

Brecht’s techniques, John Willet says, are stated in comparison with the Aristotelian theatre’s techniques of plot, theme, character/actor, spectator, and scene (1959, p. 98-9). Thus, the plot of the Aristotelian theatre that implicates the spectator in a stage situation is replaced by the narrative form that turns the spectator into an

observer by arousing his power of action in Brecht's epic theatre. As for the human being who is taken for granted in the dramatic theatre, it becomes an object of inquiry which is able to change and alter the experimental theatre. Brecht thinks that the actors/characters should show attitudes 'gesten' or distanciation rather than feelings insisting on the audience's reflective detachment rather than complete emotional involvement (empathy). Further, the spectator who used to concentrate on the finish (the end) of the play should set his mind and eyes on the process of the situation in Brecht's theatre, since art for him is a process. In the dramatic theatre, each scene grows from the previous one. While in the epic theatre, each scene is independent from the other. They are fragmented in a form of montage to show a man that is not as consistent but has a contradictory "ever changing character whose unity comes despite or rather by means of interruption and jumps" (1959: 175-6).

These techniques are used by Baldwin in *The Amen Corner* to raise the consciousness of black people and incite them to think about the mission of the church as an institution that masks the truth about their actual situation. Poverty pushed them to blindly believe the words of the preacher because there is no other alternative to the precarious life they are living. Just like Baldwin who fled the dangers of Harlem streets into the church, Margaret and her congregation find relief inside its walls. Thus, Baldwin's aim is to force the spectator to analyze instead of identifying with the characters to think and then change the situation instead of fleeing from it. For instance, the young mother of the play, Mrs. Jackson, tearfully asks the loving Holy Spirit to save her baby by just kneeling on the altar and conjuring the spirit as shown in the excerpt below:

Sister Moor: Kneel down daughter, kneel down there in front of the altar. (Mrs. Jackson kneels.)

Margaret: I want every soul under the sound of my voice to bow his head and pray silently with me as I pray. Dear Lord, we come before you this morning to ask you to look down and bless this woman and her baby. Touch his little body and heal him and drive out every tormenting demon. Raise him up, Lord, and make him a good man and a comfort to his mother. Yes we know you can do it (p. 15).

Therefore, it needs blind faith from both the preacher and the congregation to believe such a spectacle that Baldwin transforms into sarcasm and laughter, "Margaret: No, children, don't be laughing this morning. This is serious business" (p. 9). This surge of mocking laughter has been intensified after Margaret's comments on the absence of Mrs. Jackson's husband in the church saying to the woman, "Margaret: Maybe the Lord wants you to leave that man" and Mrs. Jackson's answer: "No, He don't want that!" (p. 9), as if she knows what the Lord really wants. Furthermore, this scene and her comment on it is in reference to her old experience when she abandoned her husband in the South, pretexting that it is an order from the Holy Spirit to find true faith, lying to others about her husband who mistreated and abandoned them to pursue a life of pleasure. Ironically, Mrs. Jackson's baby died. Then, Baldwin shows her coming again to the church to scorn Margaret and the failure of the prayers to save her child.

Reversing the expected reaction from the congregation is an example of the unusual experimental effect of epic conventions by the emotional detachment (distanciation) of the characters. Brecht explains that instead of pacifying the audience with realistic performance, the play should teach and instruct through forceful strange (unfamiliar) reactions of the characters that incite the spectator to thinking rather than identifying.

The play is full of religious gestures, graceful and forceful movements, and long spirituals that are sung by the characters. In spite of that, they are often not matching with the theme of the moment. They appear as being terrified by a kind of metaphysical power to which they are indebted and should pay dues by perpetual anamnesis. Baldwin's exaggeration tends to parody the exaggerated religiosity to show the hypocrisy of the

saints who, whenever confronted with a claim or are suspected by the believers, order these latter to pray and to obey as if thinking and questioning are sinful acts that must be avoided.

Pantomime is another technique through which the characters execute the religious service by gestures without speech. They do this by raising the sacrifice which is offering money to the church at the end: “the lights dim in the church and the music continues, but lower and the offering is raised in pantomime” (p. 12). Paradoxically, though the members of the congregation are poor, they are obliged by the pastor to give their money to participate in the Lord’s charity and generosity.

Both Margaret Alexander’s church and house represent one setting showing that the family has no private life. As a result, this gives permission to the members of the congregation to open her kitchen Frigidaire whenever they want to. Further, introducing the prop of a Frigidaire into the church is highly symbolic and experimental because it says a lot about the coldness and the lack of love that characterizes both Margaret’s household and congregation gangrened by poverty and emotional depression.

Though *The Amen Corner* shows experimental techniques, it is in *Blues for Mister Charlie* performed in the mid-sixties, a period known as the Black Art Movements, that these techniques had been fully explored by Baldwin. Like other playwrights, namely LeRoi Jones, he wanted to act artistically through staging the story of Emmett Till killed by a Southern white man in 1955 for teasing a white woman. Baldwin writes in “Notes to Blues” (1964b, p. xv) that his desire to write this play stems from his will to confront his fear of drawing the portrait of the murderer. His purpose is to raise the consciousness of people and to change their mentalities, pointing out to the trial of ideas about racist murderers in his mind:

With one part of my mind, at least I hate them and would be willing to kill them. Yet, with another part of my mind, I am aware that no man is a villain in his own eyes. Something in the man knows- must know- that what he is doing is evil, but in order to accept the knowledge, the man would have to change. What is ghastly and really almost hopeless in our racial situation now is that the crimes we have committed are so great and so unspeakable that the acceptance of this knowledge would lead, literally to madness. The human being, then, in order to protect himself, closes his eyes, compulsively repeats his crimes, and enters a spiritual darkness which no one can describe (1964b, p. xiv).

Just like the purpose Baldwin wants to achieve through his play *Blues*, Epic theatre concentrates on the notion of change and the process of historicizing plays that should show the audiences things as they once happened in a particular time and place which makes them relative. Then, once the event has been historicized, the spectator can understand that things are not always the same; and since things are relative, they are changeable implying the dual process of recognition and transformation (Rush, 2005, p. 246). *Blues* is intended by Baldwin to change the mentalities through raising the consciousness of the spectator.

It was first performed in a historical moment, the mid- sixties, known for the rise of Black Nationalism that questioned the non-violent protest of the fifties. *Blues* has created a furor in Broadway and is viewed as a political act (agitation-propaganda) rather than an aesthetic one. Subsequently, it shows a changed Baldwin from a pacific Civil Right activist often named ‘St. James’ into ‘Baldwin X’ (Campbell, 1991, p. 195) because of the advocated violence for self-defense against white violence and oppression. The play stages Henry Meridian, a black minister abandoning his Bible and taking the gun. The play is also a sequel to *The Amen Corner*, staging another church and acting the return of the son (David /Richard) from the North to the South.

This was after the failure of his musical career to complete the elements of the trial of segregation, non-violent protest, and the Black Nationalism as represented by the characters. Yet, while Margaret has undergone a

spiritual transformation, Reverend Meridian has changed politically after the murder of his son by the white man called Lyle.

The setting is designed so as to fit the fissure of the segregated Southern society between Blacktown and Whitetown. It is full of props and as Baldwin asserts, “the play, for me, takes place in Plaguetown U.S.A., now. The plague is race, the plague is our concept of Christianity, and this raging plague has the power to destroy every human relationship” (1964b, p. xv). The church has become a place for propagating revolutionary ideas that turns to represent a courtroom in the third act. Baldwin emphasizes the prop of Richard’s corpse in the middle of the stage and the importance of the skeleton of the stage as stated right at the beginning of the play:

Multiple set, the skeleton of which, in the first two acts, is the Negro church, and, in the third act, the courthouse...the audience should always be aware during the first two acts, of the dome of the courthouse and the American flag. During the final act, the audience should always be aware of the steeple of the church and the cross (p. 1).

The play starts with the final act, i.e., a cyclical kind of a narration (long dialogues from the characters) that turns the spectator into an observer. It starts from the end and the characters reveal the events through dialogue to incite the audience to use their minds through the process rather than concentrating in the finish since the end is already known. The spectators’ feelings are replaced by thinking to understand how this end happened, distancing rather than involving them emotionally in an attempt to turn them into critical observers.

The characters are shown in the church doing a form of drama workshop as if they are repeating their dialogues in front of the audience. It displays Reverend Meridian teaching blasphemies for young black activists (Tom, Ken, Arthur) as a dirge upon the death of his son whose corpse is present on the stage, showing *gesten* rather than feelings:

Meridian: No, no, no! You have to say it like you mean it-the way they [whites] really say it: nigger, nigger! Nigger! Tom, the way you saying it, it sounds like you just might want to make friends. And that’s not the way they sound out there. Remember all that has happened. Remember we having a funeral here-tomorrow night. Remember why. Go on, hit it again.

Tom: You dirty nigger, you no-good black bastard, what are you doing down here, anyway?

Meridian: That’s much better. Much, much better. Go on.

Tom: Hey boy, how much does your mother charge? How much does your sister charge?

Ken: How much does your wife charge?

Meridian: Now you got it. You really got it now. That’s them.

Keep walking, Arthur, keep walking!

Tom: You get your ass off these streets from around here, boy, or we going to do us some cutting-we’re going to cut that big, black thing off of you, you hear?

Meridian: Why are you all standing around her like that? Go on and get you a nigger. Go on! (a scuffle.)

Meridian: All right. All right. Come on, now. Come on (Ken steps forwards and spits in Arthur’s face.)

Arthur: You black s.o.b. what the hell do you think you’re doing? You mother-! (p. 3).

The characters of Blacktown jump between their actions in the church, their political activism outside in the street, and their amusement in Papa D's Juke Joint dancing till the morning, "doing very lively variations of the 'twist', 'the wobble', etc." (p. 24). Through their detached actions, the characters intend to "screw the minds of the white men forever" (p. 24), meaning that the reflection of the spectators is the desired result.

The characters are set as objects of inquiry rather than being taken for granted by the playwright who declared openly that concerning Lyle, for instance, his duty is to "understand this wretched man", and to understand the profile of this white serial-killer of blacks. Lyle has already killed a black man, Bill Walker, because he had a secret love-affair with the latter's wife. Hence, when Walker discovered it, Lyle shot him dead while the black woman flees North. Baldwin's aim in this inquiry on the American stage is "to act change and liberate his children for a better future" (1964b, p. xiv).

Black characters in the play are not presented as being consistent wholes, but as being contradictory and ever changing humans. Their change from, "simple people-warm-hearted and good-natured but very easily led" (p. 49), into thinking and acting individuals like Richards, creates a convulsion in the minds of the white characters. This becomes clear in their dialogue in Lyle's house while celebrating the anniversary of his marriage with Jo. The subject of their discussion is Lyle's arrest by the police after being suspected of killing Richards. They speak about the fear created by Richard's speech and action in Lyle's shop that deeply affected the white community. Therefore, in a conversation with her guests, Jo expresses her great fear of the blacks who became, since then, foreigners to them:

Jo: I've never been scared in this town before - never...But now, when I walk through this - I am scared- like I don't know what's going to happen next. How come the colored people hate us so much, all of a sudden? We give them everything they've got!...You can't tell what they are thinking. Why? Colored folks you have known all your life, you are almost afraid to hire them, almost afraid to talk to them, and you don't know what they're thinking. (p. 49)

These discourses are heard by white and black audiences who are incited to think and reevaluate the racial crisis, racists' practices, and finally reacting against white segregationist system and the discipline they desire to impose on blacks through normalizing white oppressive power that the mature black agency, Baldwin, has introduced in the play resists and defies.

Meridian, the public man, the pastor of the black church questions the Christian faith in his dialogue with his white friend, Parnell. He explains to him that he had been a fervent believer all his life. Therefore, after the murder of his son, Richard, and the corruption surrounding the trial of his murderer, he no longer believes in religious love that changes anything. He stated:

Meridian: I've been thinking, I've had to think-would I have been such a Christian, if I hadn't been born black? Maybe I had to become a Christian in order to have any dignity at all. Since I wasn't a man in men's eyes, then I could be a man in the eyes of God. But that didn't protect my wife. She's dead too soon, and we don't really know how. That didn't protect my son - he's dead, we know how too well...the eyes of God - maybe those eyes are blind (p. 38).

Meridian's wife died in a mysterious circumstance. Yet, her son, Richard, and the majority of the Blacktown people believe she had been dragged on the stairs of the hotel in which she worked as a stair-cleaner by a white man. His son, Richard, was killed by Lyle. Though all the people of the Whitetown and the Blacktown know the identity of the killer, yet the killer was acquitted by an all-white jury. Thus, Meridian's changed from his complacent religious love to questioning which surprises his white friend, Parnell:

Parnell: Meridian, you can't be the man who gives the signal for the holocaust.

Meridian: Must I be the man who watches while his people are beaten, chained, starved, clubbed, butchered?

Parnell: I've never seen you like this before. There's something in your tone I've never heard before-rage-maybe-hatred.

Meridian: You've heard it before. You just never recognized it before. You've heard it in all those blues and spirituals and gospel songs you claim to love so much (p. 39).

Baldwin's theatre is intended to create change in the minds of white and black people by finding a site for racial dialogue. Hence, the intermediary is the white writer, Parnell. This character is both Meridian's and Lyle's friend and a renegade journalist who tries to understand them. Paradoxically, at the end, he has not denounced his white criminal friends. At the same time, he has chosen to march with the black students telling Lyle that "as you and I will never be the same again, our comedy is finished" (p. 117). The end of the play is a marching for freedom launched by Meridian, a gun in hand, announcing the violent struggle that the blacks should use after becoming conscious that handing the other cheek will never secure their rights and dignity.

Conclusion

Baldwin has used Western paradigms both at the level of form and content in writing his plays. His conception of love has been inspired from the Greek philosopher, Plato, in his dialogue *Symposium*. This was followed by Brecht's experimental techniques like satire and distanciation to incite the critical thinking of the audience. Both Baldwin's play, *The Amen Corner* and the *Blues for Mister Charlie*, subvert the religious love that paralyzes any attempt at revolting against white oppression and in changing their situation. Baldwin aims at defusing the church's stronghold on its black members through showing that it is a "mask for hatred and self-hatred". This was despite the fact that it has a considerable influence in his life and in his theatre. He openly speaks his mind by addressing the minds of American audiences to think and act change.

Both Margaret Alexander and Henry Meridian are passionate pastors who served the church all their lives, yet they couldn't save their offspring from the oppressive racism that either kills black babies or murders adult black young men. However, Baldwin handles Western aesthetic models of the platonic love-dialogue and experimental techniques as designed by Brecht to show a new generation of blacks who are politically conscious and refuse to follow the tradition of their religious and submissive parents. This they did by organizing themselves to display their rage, hatred, and violent reactions against the racist system. Consequently, Baldwin's theatre imposes itself in the Western stage using Plato and Brecht in testing his ideas publicly to act change.

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Notes

(1) Pentecostalism is a Christian religious belief emphasizing the gift of the Holy Spirit, traditionally first bestowed on the day of the Pentecost. The latter is the occasion of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and other followers of Jesus Christ, as described in The Acts of the Apostles. Fundamentalism is a protestant view that affirms the absolute authority of the Bible and holds that alternate religious views within Christianity or in other religions are false.

(2) Although Agathon did win a theatrical competition in 416 BC, and that the guests are real historical figures, there is no historical evidence for a celebration of the sort Plato describes as *Symposium*. The work itself is believed to have been composed sometime between 385 BC and 370 BC. For the discussion of the date of composition, see H. Mattingly 'The date of Plato's Symposium', *Phronesis* (1958) 3: 31–9 and K. Dover 'The date of Plato's Symposium', *Phronesis* (1965) 10: 2–20. (see Howatson M.C., & Sheffield C.C. 2008, p. vii).

(3) Dionysus is the god of wine, winemaking, ritual, madness, fertility, and religious ecstasy in Greek mythology; and according to Nietzsche, it represents the spirit of the Greek tragedy (*The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)).

(4) Throughout the article, the title of the play is referred to using the following abbreviation: *Blues* refers to Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie*.