

The Landscape of the Invisibles in Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*

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Abstract

The rapid growth in technological industries and international trade deals has affected the working-class community in the United States. They have to face unemployment and poverty because machines replaced workers in their work, causing the downsize of the numbers of the workers. The current paper examines how Lynn Nottage explores the de-industrial landscape of Reading town in Pennsylvania to display the impact of the economic crisis on the working-class community. *Sweat* unveils the dire conditions of work in the factory where those workers used to work and their suffering after losing their jobs. The employers and the government marginalized those workers as being invisible. The playwright set the play between 2000-2008 to present the economic and financial transformations, which consequently have motivated racial hostilities among the different ethnic groups of workers. The paper's aim is to reveal the impact of poverty and unemployment on raising the evil inside human nature. The significance of the study lies in showing who is to be blamed for racial and hostile actions among various ethnic groups and the reasons for them. The playwright sheds light on the moral decline caused by the economic crisis when human beings feel they are invisible.

Keywords: invisible, marginalization, poverty, *Sweat*, workers

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You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away.

-Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

Introduction:

Economic and industrial collapse affect the society in general and the working-class community particularly because their lives depend on their work in various industries. Life becomes challenging for those who struggle with poverty and social invisibility to survive. Nottage, in *Sweat*, writes about Reading, which was one of the famous and robust industrial towns in the United States, and how Reading has been transformed after the de-industrial revolution. Its people are mostly workers coming from various racial backgrounds to live and work in it; however, they are poorly affected by this transformation since they have to face unemployment and poverty. The negative consequences of the de-industrial revolution shattered the workers' dreams because those workers are ignored by the government.

Lynn Nottage (1964) was born in Brooklyn to a schoolteacher and a child psychologist. She got her diploma from New York's High School of Music and Art in Harlem. She received her B.A. degree from Brown University. Nottage had her M.F.A. in playwriting at Yale School of Drama in 1989. She received playwriting fellowship from Manhattan Theatre Club, New Dramatists, and the New York Foundation for Arts. Nottage works as a lecturer in playwriting at Yale University. She won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 2009 for *Ruined* and in 2017 for *Sweat*. Thus, she becomes the first female playwright to win the prestigious award twice. Nottage's distinguished works enable her to be one of the most respected and most produced African American Female playwrights of the twenty-first century (Shannon, 2007).

***Sweat's* Background**

The setting of *Sweat* (2015) is in the town of Reading, Pennsylvania. It presents the life of the working-class community and their devastating experience of the impact of de-industrialization in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The origin of *Sweat* was an email from a friend that Nottage received in 2011 as her friend told her about the financial and economic suffering she had after the 2008 economic collapse. Her friend did not want Nottage to help financially but let her know that those workers suffer marginalization; they are invisible to the American society. Nottage started searching the story (E. Brown, 2016). The workers in Reading were suffering from not having decent work; they work in harmful conditions. However, their suffering increased and became at stake when they lost their jobs because of the economic decline. According to the Psychology of Working Framework, people need to work to fulfill the primary human needs for survival and power, social connection, and the need for self-achievement. Social, economic, political, and historical forces are regarded in the shaping of the Psychology of Working Framework (Blustein, 2013). The steelworkers in *Sweat* embody the real workers in Reading whom Nottage had met and listened to their stories. Nottage explained how the steelworkers of Reading were eager to talk about their tragic stories because they "feel completely invisible" (Glasberg, 2017, para.8). To be invisible is to be marginalized. Those workers have the right to get decent work, which is defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as the labor

which “involves a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration” (International Labour Organization, 2020, para.1).

In Reading, the steelworkers have been working in manufacturers for decades, yet this work cannot be described as a decent one. Nottage spent two years of extensive interview-based research in Reading as the basis of writing *Sweat*. She produced it after being asked by the Orgon Shakespeare Festival and Washington D.C.'s Arena Stage to contribute a play for their American Revolutions cycle. She performed to focus on what she called the De-industrial Revolution (E. Brown, 2016). Nottage (2015) described the journey of research and writing *Sweat*:

In January 2012, I began travelling to Reading with an eye toward collecting the stories of people battling to survive in a city crippled by economic stagnation. What I found was a racially diverse and fractured city that had once been a steel and manufacturing powerhouse but has since become plagued by rising and unemployment. (para. 1)

The playwright spent two years and a half in Reading to know what happened there and the reasons for this transformation from a town which welcome immigrants from all over the world, as they will immediately find a job in this town, to end like “a grape on the vine” (Wallenberg, 2020, para. 5).

Plot Overview

Sweat opened in 2008 when a parole officer, Evan, talks to Jason and Chris, two young men who have committed a racial crime eight years ago. Chris and Jason are friends since childhood because their mother, Cynthia, and Tracy, are best friends. Chris is an African American who finds in the church his solace as compensation for his past crime; Jason is a white American with tattoos covering his face. The following scene shift to a bar in 2000 as the playwright displays the background of the events that ends these two young men in prison. The playwright sets most of the events in a bar in Reading town in 2000. It is Tracy's forty-fifth birthday in which she is celebrating with her close friends Cynthia and Jessie. They are friends for a long time as they have been working at Olstead's Metal Tubing together for decades; when they finish their work, they are used to meet at the local bar, managed by Stan and Oscar helps in serving the customers. Chris and Jason are frequent customers, also. However, this tight friendship bond is shaken when Cynthia, the African American woman, is promoted from the floor to management. Meanwhile, Cynthia's promotion coincides with dismissing many workers and moving most of the machinery to Mexico. *Sweat* presents the suffering of those workers who are marginalized as they are invisible to their managers and government. Two elections are mentioned, the election of Bush II and Obama. Yet, none of them gave a hand to those workers. The play explores their struggle with long hours of work, minimized benefits, slashed pensions, and eventually unemployment and poverty. The increasing tensions after Cynthia's promotion and the news of near unemployment lead to racial feeling against the Latinos, which is depicted by Chris' and Jason's assault on Oscar, the young Colombian American who works with Stan in the bar. Stan is badly injured and has brain damage in his attempt to stop the fight and protect Oscar.

The Invisibles in *Sweat*

In choosing to write about those workers, Nottage was interested in the transformation, the economic and the financial one, which impacted the communities in Reading as they turn to cannibalize each other (Wallenberg, 2020). Violent actions are the consequences of marginalization and poverty. One of the stories mentioned by friends in *Sweat* emphasizes the effect of unemployment and poverty. The story of Freddy Brunner, who is one of the old employees at Olstead, after being dismissed from his job, he is in debt, and his wife has left him, he has burnt his own house and tries to shoot himself out of depression.

The situation of the steelworkers depicted in the play presents the dire conditions of their work, which is far away from the characteristics of a decent job. There is no promotion of advancement in their work, no matter how long they have been working. All the characters of workers, except Cynthia, are not promoted despite their work for more than twenty years for the manufacturer.

Tracy: Hey Stan, how many years did you put in before the injury? Stan: Twenty-eight.
 Tracy: And in those twenty-eight years you ever see anyone move off the floor?
 Stan: ...Um, no ... wait, wait ... there was Griff Parker. Tracy: Yeah,
 but he left, went to college camp back as management. They didn't pluck him off the line.
 Doesn't count. (Nottage, 2017, p.24)

Thus, the company exploits them without an appreciation of their hard work and the long years in the company. To be promoted is not to have a raise in the salary only but to have the development in a career, which is one of the fundamentals of work. Another way of exploiting them is by giving them a low payment, which is enough for survival but not for living. Jason tells Chris that he cannot save money, expresses his resentment for having to work extra hours to save money:

Money get a way of running outcha pocket. Nobody tells you that no matter how hard you work there will never be enough money to rest. It's fact. A fact that should be taught to every child; Look at me. I been trying to save a little something for school, right? But every time I tuck it away, I hear the cry of "Nike Flight-posite," "Air Jordan XV," a meal at the Olive Garden, and a movie will set you back two days' work. (Nottage, 2017, p. 29)

What those workers earn is enough to survive and not welfare. Working for more than 10 hours in a day does not match equal payment. They do not have money to have fun with their families and friends. It seems that they have wasted their lives in worthless work. Moreover, things get worse when the company will "ask everyone to take a pay cut to save jobs. Sixty percent" (Nottage, 2017, p.51). The company has a strategy to avoid the loss at the expense of the workers who are treated as slaves, as explained by Brucie, Cynthia's ex-husband:

Didn't wanna take the new contract. Be a fucking slave. That's what they want. We offered to take a fifty percent pay cut, they won't budge, they want us to give up our retirement.

What's the point? Full circle, a lifetime, and be the same place I was when I was eighteen. (Nottage, 2017, p.35)

A new contract is offered to those who have passed the age of working, which pays. Also, the company does not reimburse the retirement fund. Nottage chose the de-industrial landscape to display the consequences of the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which involved several industrial American cities. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has its side effects on American workers as they are the only ones who pay for the decline of the economy. They find themselves forced to accept low wages or to be dismissed by their employers because Mexican immigrants replace them in work, and those immigrants are ready to get wages lower than the American workers (Bondarenko, 2019). Cynthia told her friends and son that the company will to ship most of the machines to Mexico, which means they will dismiss many workers, or they have to accept the lower wages offered to them and no retirement for those who have been working for a long time. Chris asks: "are they trying to squeeze us out?" (Nottage, 2017, p.73). Cynthia tells them that they are "dealing with vipers" (Nottage, 2017, p.75).

Tracy, who has worked since she could count-money, has found herself threaten to be homeless because she cannot pay the bills of her house. When she goes to the union office for help, they present a humiliating offer in the form of a bag of groceries and some vouchers to the supermarket, after these long years. Tracy does not have financial security for her future to live a better life. Chris cannot join the next semester because he does not have money to continue his school education; he has to work double shifts to have extra money; otherwise, his payment is only for his daily expenses. Jason dreams of opening a Dunkin Donuts with his future pension; however, his dream is not going to be fulfilled because the company is not going to give them the retirement according to the new contracts. Thus, stress becomes another element, besides money, controlling their lives as they are always worried that they may lose their jobs or their payments will be cut out because of the economic crisis. This worriedness is part of their daily conversation; on her birthday, Tracy asks them to stop the same discussion which they have been having for twenty years to enjoy the moment.

Moreover, the conditions of the work are unhealthy as the workers may expose to injury at any time. After her promotion, Cynthia describes the difference between being a worker on the floor and working in the office:

I'm not wearing my Carhartt, not gonna be on my feet for ten hours, I loosen my support belt, I don't have to worry about my fingers cramping or the blood blister on my left foot. I can stop sweating because goddamn the office has air conditioning. (Nottage, 2017, p.53)

Working in bad conditions makes injury inevitable. When someone is injured, the company does not care like Stan, who has been disabled by the machine and must stay for two months in the hospital. He says:

That's when I understood, that's when I knew, I was nobody to them nobody! Three generations of loyalty to the same company. This is America, right? You'd think that would mean something. They behave like they're doing you a goddamn favor. (Nottage, 2017, p.37)

The long years those workers have in the company are not enough to make them visible to the owners of the Olstead. They are ignored and not regarded as human beings. Cynthia clarifies; "Twenty-four years, and I can't remember talking to anyone in the office, except to do paperwork" (Nottage, 2017, p.54). She continues "I mean some of these folks have been working there as long as us, but they're as unfamiliar as a stranger sitting next to you on a bus" (Nottage, 2017, p.54). There is a distinction in her talking between 'they' and 'us', as if they belong to a specific part which those poor workers would never be part of it. Nottage transcends the cultural and gender themes to write about more universal issues. *Sweat* is about the marginalization and alienation of the American industrial cities after the decline of industries, which has led to the financial crisis. The events of play display the political as well as the economic changes between 2000-2008. Trade deals are done to downsize the number of workers and their wages. *Sweat* covers two presidential elections and reached New York at the beginning of another (Biggsby, 2017). A review of *Sweat* in the *New York Times* describes the play as "the first work from a major American playwright to summon, with empathy and without judgment, the nationwide anxiety that helped put Donald Trump in the white house."

Nottage weaves the past and the present to show how history repeats itself in the same way as the workers are always the victims who pay the price. Brucie, Cynthia's ex-husband, tells Stan how he belongs to a family that immigrated to America facing difficulties in working in one of the manufacturers of Reading. After the First World War, managers of the manufacturers hired African Americans for work replacing the white Americans because they accepted to work for low wages in comparison with the white Americans. The white American workers were threatened by being unemployed (Sweet and Meiksins, 2016). The same thing happened again in the first decade of the twenty-first century when both African Americans and White Americans are exposed to unemployment and replaced by Latinos. The latter accepts to be hired as short-term employees without benefits. In the two cases, the manager has the benefits and the workers, despite their racial roots, are the victims. This strategy motivates racial hostility against each other. Racial hostility breaks the bond of friendship among Cynthia, Tracy, and Jessie when Cynthia has been promoted, and she is African American. Her friends do not regard her as a friend anymore. Each of the characters tries to prove that he belongs to Reading and the factory more than anyone else. Tracy's racial aggression grows out of her disappointment and poverty. She has morally declined by encouraging both Chris and Jason to assault on Oscar because he is a Colombian. Nottage has depicted the inevitable racial violence as the consequences of depression and unemployment (Mohler, McMahon & Roman, 2016).

The last scene in the play is what Nottage considers the beginning of the play as

you have four men who come from very difficult backgrounds standing on the stage in a moment of crisis and trying to find the vocabulary to communicate across the divide. That's what I began with, and I thought, how did I get there? (J. Brown, 2016, para.15)

The character of Oscar is at the center of the play because he is always present working more than talking. He is invisible to those who are talking most of the time; he works behind the bar serving everyone. Thus, he embodies the working-class in Reading, who is marginalized by their employers and government. What happens to Oscar to be a victim of racial violence represents the depressing of the working-class community who are victims. Stan is another iconic character who stands for the optimistic view of Nottage herself. Stan is disabled in his attempt to protect Oscar, but he has the will to work again. He stands for Reading, this town, despite its decline, continues to work and receive people from everywhere. Nottage explains: "We can get dinged and battered and bruised but we still have the will to rise. I think it's true of Oscar as well. These are two characters who take a beating but are not beaten" (Jung, 2017, para.27). The playwright explains that the characters in *Sweat* do not differ from the characters in *Ruined*; in the two plays, there are people who have to make compromised choices to survive the spectacle they live. However, she does not think that the ending of *Sweat* is a hopeful one as she says: "I always look for spaces of sunlight, but there were few pockets of optimism" (Miller 90JRN, 2017, p.4). The workers' sweat brings them together, and it is their sweat that should make them visible to their employers and government. It is sweat mingled by hard work and love of each one of them.

Conclusion:

Sweat becomes Nottage's universal mark in depicting the consequences of poverty and marginalization. Nottage explores the change of human nature because of deprivation of the basics of life by presenting a thorough examination of a friendship bond in which poverty and unemployment play a role in motivating envy, racial prejudice, and hostility. *Sweat* examines the right of the working-class community to have a good life like other classes. Those workers have dreams which are invested in vain. Nottage has intended to give voice to those poor workers who continue living in the past to escape their reality; she wanted to shed light on them and bring them to the area of visibility. Economic and social invisibility are diseases causing crisis as what happened at the end of the play. Oscar and Stan are not victims of Chris and Jason. The four are victimized by poverty and marginalization. Reading is a sample of all the cities sharing the same crises; the de-industrial changes increase poverty and unemployment, which consequently have an impact on the shift in human nature towards the worse. Nottage shows the consequences of treating people as invisible.

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