

An Analysis of Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending" Based on the Features of Expressionist Drama

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Abstract

Expressionism arose in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to bourgeois complacency and the increasing mechanization and urbanization of society. At its height between 1910 and 1925, just before and after the first world war, expressionist writers distorted objective features of the sensory world using symbolism and dream-like elements in their works illustrating the alienating and often emotionally overwhelmed sensibilities. The term refers to a movement in Germany very early in the 20th century in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. The term can be applied to literature, but only judiciously. The theories of Expressionism had considerable influence in Germany and Scandinavia. In fact, expressionism dominated the theater for a time in the 1920s. Theatrically it was a reaction against realism and aimed to show inner psychological realities.

This paper endeavours to analyse the Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending" based on the features of Expressionist drama. In his play Williams have efforted to depict his personal expression according to the society after the first world war. First, with the reference to the features of Expressionist drama a pattern of analysis will be structured. Then, the analysis of Williams' play based on these features will be indicated. Finally, the result of analysis will be investigated for better reading and comprehend the plays of this type.

Keywords: Expressionism, Symbolism, External reality, Mechanization, Urbanization, The First World War, 20th century, Realism

1. Introduction

This study tries to analysis, Tennessee Williams' play "Orpheus Descending" based on the features of Expressionist drama, to find the features of this kind of play that can be structured the drama. Expressionism refers to a movement in Germany very early in the 20th century (1905) in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world. The term can be applied to literature, but only judiciously. The main principle involved is that expression determines form, and therefore imagery, punctuation, syntax, and also forth. Indeed, any of the formal rules and elements of writing can be bent or disjoined to suit the purpose. (Cudden, 1999)

Unlike the French impressionist, who were primarily concerned with artistic technique to create a different effect, Expressionism is not primarily driven by technique, but a desire to express emotion. Expressionism is the tendency of an artist to distort reality for an emotional effect; it is a subjective art form. Also until Impressionism, which was limited primarily to painting, expressionism, spread to many art forms, including not only painting, but literature, film, architecture and music. The term may apply to any emotional expression, but it was particularly associated with the expression of angst –the number of cheerful expressionist work is relatively small. In fact, expressionism dominated the theatre for a time in the 1920s. Theatrically it was a reaction against realism and aimed to show inner psychological realities. It also seeks to display strong emotion. These plays often dramatize spiritual awakening and sufferings of their protagonists, and are referred to as station play, modeled on the episodic presentation of the suffering and death of Jesus in the stations of the cross, they depict the struggle against bourgeois values and established authority, personified in the figure of the Father. (Hirsch, 2002)

Expressionist drama flourished in Germany, in the work of Reinhard Johannes Sorge, Georg Kaiser, Erust Toller, Paul Kornfeld, Fritz Von Unruh, and Walter Hasen Clever. In the USA, a strong expressionist influence can be traced in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Tennessee Williams is the most exciting and influential theatre talent of America. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911,

of old and genteel southern heritage. He was an American writer who worked principally as a playwright in the American theatre. He received virtually all of the top theatrical awards for his works of drama, including a Tony Award for best play for "The Rose Tattoo"(1951) and the Pulitzer prize for drama, for "A Street Car Named Desire"(1948) and "Cat on a Hot Roof"(1955). (Nelson, 1961)

It is crucial to analysis Williams' works based on the effect of Expressionism, due to the fact that he as a playwright pictured the expressionist world through the lines of his work. Therefore, this study attempts to show his influences of this new world (after the first world war), in his play for better understanding and analysing the plays of this type.

2. Analysis and Discussion

2.1 Expressionism

A German movement in literature and the other arts (especially the virtual arts) which was at its height between 1910 and 1925- that is, in the period just before, during, and after the First World War. Its chief precursors were artists and writers who had in various ways departed from realistic depictions of life and the world, by expressing in their art visionary or powerfully emotional states of mind. Among these precursors, in painting, were Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and the Norwegian Edward Munch- Munch's lithograph "The Cry"(1894) depicting, against a bleak background, a tense figure with distorted face uttering a scream of pure horror, is often taken to epitomize what became the expressionist mode. Prominent among the literary precursors of the movement in the nineteenth century were the French poet Charls Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and above all the Swedish dramatist August Strindberg.

Expressionism itself was never a concerted or well-defined movement. It can be said, however, that its central feature is a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of realism, both in subject matter and in style. The expressionist artist or writer undertakes to express a personal vision- usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision- of human life and human society. This is done by exaggerating and distorting what, according to the norms of artistic realism, are objective feature of the outer world, and by embodying violent extremes of mood and feeling. Often the works implies that what is depicted or described represent the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos. Expressionist who were radical in their politics also projected utopian views of a future community in a regenerate world. Expressionist painters tended to use jagged lines to depict contorted objects and forms, as well as, to substitute arbitrary, often lurid colors, for natural hues; among these painters were Email Nolde, Franz Marc, Oskar Kokeschka, and for a time, Wassily Kandinsky. Expressionist poet (include the Germans Gottfried Benn and Georg Trakl) departed from standard meter, syntax, and poetic structure to organize their works around symbolic images. Expressionist writers of prose narratives (most eminently Franz Kafka) abandoned standard modes of characterization and plot for symbolic figures involved in an obsessive world of nightmarish events. (Abrams, 1988, p. 61-63)

Expressionism, a general term for a mode of literary or visual art which, in extreme reaction against realism or naturalism, presents a world violently distorted under the pressure of intense personal moods, ideas, and emotions: image and language thus express feeling and imagination rather than represent external reality. In literature, expressionism is often considered a revolt against realism and naturalism, seeking to achieve a psychological or spiritual reality rather than record external events in logical sequence. (Hewitt, 1975)

2.2 Expressionist Drama

The theatre of Expressionism began in Berlin in 1918 with the production of Ernest Toller's *Die wandlung*, subtitle *A man's wrestling*. During the 20th century, especially after the First World War, western drama became more internationally unified and less the product of separate national literary traditions. Throughout the century realism, naturalism, and symbolism (and various combinations of these) continued to inform important plays. Among the many 20th century playwrights who have written what can be broadly termed naturalist dramas are Gerhart Hauptman(German), John Galsworthy(English), John Millington and Sean O' Casey(Irish), and Eugene O' Neill, Clifford Odest, and Lillian Hellman and Tennessee Williams(America). An important movement in early 20th century drama was expressionism. Expressionist playwrights tried to convey the dehumanizing aspects of 20th century technological dialogue, talking machines, and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals. Notable playwright who wrote expressionist drama include Ernest Toller and Georg Kaiser (German), Elmer Rice and Eugene O'neill, Tennessee Williams (America). The 20th century, also saw the attempts revival of drama in verse, but although such writers as William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and Maxwell Anderson produced effective results, verse drama was no longer an important form in English. (Biggsby, 1982)

In Spanish, however, the poetic dramas of Federico Garcia Lorca are placed among the great works of Spanish

literature. In the drama, Strindberg is considered the forefather of the expressionist, though the term is specially applied to a group of early 20th century German dramatists, including Toller, Kaiser, and Wedekind. Their works was often characterized by a bizarre distortion of reality. The movement, though short-lived, gave impetus to a free form of writing and of production in modern theatre. (Valgema, 1972)

Expressionist plays consist of the extreme simplification of characters to mythic types, choral effects, declamatory dialogue and heightened intensity. In other words, Expressionist plays often dramatise the spiritual awakening and sufferings of their protagonists and are referred to as stationedramen (station drama), modeled on the episodic presentation of the suffering and death of Jesus in the station of the cross. The plays often dramatise the struggle against bourgeois values and established authority, often personified in the figure of the Father. (Kuhans, 1997)

The dramatic stress is on language, often profoundly lyrical at the expense of plot and psychologically drawn characters. Moreover, Expressionist drama attempts to exteriorize inner psychic states in the human being. Expressionists argue for the necessity to reinstitute spectacularly by returning to the origins of drama and borrowing their expressive resources. One of these, is the use of masks with their implied psychic penetration and emotional power. Another is the use of the choir. However, what Expressionists repudiate from classical drama is the concept of Aristotelian mimesis and the rigidity of its classical unities. Expressionist drama searches for a retrieval of human beings to redeem them from the dehumanised state in which industrialism and materialism have plunged them. Another trait common to Expressionist author is the profound emotional and visual content of their artistic works, which invariably appeal to human spiritual values. By finding the features of Expressionist drama, it will probably cause that this movement will comprehend better. Therefore, the features will be defined as follows.

2.2.1 Features of Expressionist Drama

However disparate the views on Expressionism may be, it is generally true that an Expressionist play will tend to be different from a Neo-Romantic or Naturalistic play, no matter how extensive their common roots. Perhaps the most striking formal feature of expressionist drama is abstraction. Essentially, this means that the expressionist dramatist is not concerned with projecting an illusion of reality on the stage; instead he gives something abstracted from reality, that is, either something taken from the real world but reduced to the bare minimum, or something totally abstracted from reality in the sense that the norms of time, place and individualisation have been completely abandoned. Hence in expressionism there is constant stress on giving the essence- the heart of the matter- deeper images of “mere” surface appearances. Not surprisingly, actions and plots are also pared down to the important outlines and only crucial situations are presented, while all “unnecessary” detail is eliminated. This same tendency is noticeable in the treatment of the dramatic figures, which show no characteristic features of particular individuals but tend to embody principles which the author holds to be important. This same tendency is noticeable in the treatment of the dramatic figures, which show no characteristic features of particular individuals but tend to embody principles which the author holds to be important. As such, they bear no names and instead are often simply designated as Father, Mother, Husband, or Wife. Other dramatic figures can similarly represent states of mind, social positions, official function, etc; hence they are introduced merely as Cashier and Officer. The intention is clearly to move away from the specific and the conditioned to a more general sphere of reference and significance. (Galense, 2002, p. 91)

Abstraction of this kind is, needless to say, by no means restricted to Expressionist drama; indeed, it is a feature of expressionist art in general. All in all, this is in line with the expressionists’ reaction against the materialistic philosophy of the Naturalist, who tended to show the force of milieu, race, class and social circumstance as factors conditioning the character of the individual. Expressionists were not interested in character in this sense and did not attempt to create dramatic characters in their plays. Characters for them meant a limitation of space. They were more concerned with the soul, that which is common to all men. Instead of creating an impression of real people in real situations, the expressionist dramatists will therefore strive with religious longing for something beyond the merely material, for eternal and transcendental values. But whatever the reasons offered, time and place were ignored by the Expressionist dramatist so that he could feel free to create his own subjective universe. The dream, with its associations apparently lacking in cause or logic, was substituted for normal reality. For this practice there was a model to hand in Strindberg, though there had been forerunners within the German dramatic tradition, among whom Kliest attracted most attention. Thus, from the Beggar to Kaiser’s Gas, one constantly encounters dream-like sequences and figures. (Hirsch & Kett, 2002)

After the dream, the most outstanding formal elements in the Expressionist drama is the monologue. This is perhaps not surprising considering its function as the main vehicle for expressing the subjective developments within the soul of the lyrical-dramatic protagonists. The use of the monologue demonstrates yet another contrast with the Naturalists, who had argued that in real life people were supposed to converse and not soliloquize. The revival of the

monologue was propitious for the expressionist dramatist, who did not see life in terms of communication and sociability. The leading character (or author- hero) in an expressionist play often pours out his or her soul in long monologues usually couched in an elliptical language that is not so much framed to carry statements as to emit what is called Expressionist schrei (scream). (Bordman, 1984)

The expressionist dramatist is not concerned to show normal life lived at a normal level or tempo. Instead, he(dramatist) strives for the exceptional and extreme. The protagonist simply explodes in the situation. In this way once again he breaks through the restricting bonds of normalcy and is beside or beyond himself. At its best this means arriving at a state of ecstasy, which is the aim of the fundamental religious striving of the expressionists. Expressionist ecstasy means experiencing the Divine immediately and absolutely, and not merely attempting to grasp it logically or rationally. At the same time, rhetorical and ecstatic monologues are not merely an expression of the isolated protagonist; they have a powerful effect on each member of the audience who is there to be stirred up out of his bourgeois mediocrity by powerful utterance. As far as actual structure of an expressionist drama is concerned, dynamism has been singled out as the one significantly new elements. By this is meant not only the forceful nature of the language employed, but also the principle whereby the protagonist is shown following a certain path through life. Essentially, the dynamic, episodic structure mirrored the inner turmoil and awareness of chaos in the soul of the central figure, who, following the religious model, often goes through a total transformation. (Galense, 2002, p. 90-92)

3. Applications and Analysis

According to the features of expressionist drama, a pattern for analyzing is structured. As a case study, Williams's "Orpheus Descending" was selected to be read and analysed based on these features, also it can be seen in the following lines.

3.1 The Analysis of "Orpheus Descending" Based on the Features of Expressionist Drama

The story is set in a dry goods store in a small southern town marked, in the play, by conformity, sexual frustration, narrowness, and racism. Into this scene steps Val, a young man with a guitar, a snakeskin jacket, a questionable past, and undeniable animal- erotic energy and appeal. He gets job in the dry goods store run by a middle- aged woman named Lady, whose elderly husband is dying. Lady has a past and passions of her own. She finds herself attracted to Val and to the possibility of new life he seems to offer. It is a tempting antidote to her loveless marriage and boring, small- town life. The play describes the awakening of passions, love and life- as well as its tragic consequences for Val and Lady. At the end of the play the death of Lady by her husband, depicts the climax of tragedy.

When Beulah (she is one of the relative of Jabe (Lady's husband)) one of the crucial feature of Expressionist drama as monologue is used by her:

"Lady's father was a wop from the old country and when he first come here with a mandolin and a monkey that wore a little green velvet suit, ha ha." (act 1, scene 1, p. 15)

This features (monologue) is used in the play when Lady explain her new confectionary:

"That's the confectionary; it's closed now but it's going to be reopened in a short while and I'm going to compete for the might life in this country, the after- the- movies trade".
(act 1, scene 2, p. 53)

Williams uses this features(monologue) when he describes his childhood and family in Bayon:

"After my folks all scattered away like loose chicken's feathers blown around by the wind- I stayed there alone on the Bayou, hunted and trapped out of seasons and hid from the low."
(act 2, scene 1, p. 63)

Another feature of Expressionist drama is abstraction which Williams reveals it when Vee speaks about her childhood:

"I was born, I was born with a caul! A sort of thing like a veil, a thin, this sort of a web was over my eyes, it's a sign that you're going to have visions, and I did, I had did."(act 2, scene 2, p. 83)

The next feature of Expressionist drama is dream that Williams shows it when Val is describing a kind of birds which is not real:

"They are a kind of birds that don't have legs so it can't hight on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky. That's true. I seen one once." (act 1, scene 2, p. 55)

Carol utterance her sense of love to Val, based on this feature (deam) of expressionist drama:

“I’d love to hold you that way, with that same- tender protection! Because you hang the moon for me!” (act 2, scene 1, p. 77)

The scream, is used by Lady when she reveals her secret to David (Lady’s lover):

“Well, now you do know, you know now. I carried your child in my body, the summer you quite me but I had it cut out of my body and they cut my heart out with it.”(act 2, scene 1, p. 78)

Williams utilitises this feature (scream) in Lady’s words about her husband’s cruelty:

“There’s a man up there that set fire to my father’s wine garden and I lost my life in it three lives was lost, in its two born lives and one- not... . I was made to commit a murder by him up there!” (act 3, scene 3, p. 129)

Williams depicts the last feature of Expressionist drama, dynamism, spectacularly in his play, when Carol asserts for having a relationship with Val:

“I run with no body, I hoped I could run with you, you’re in danger here, snakeskin. you’ve taken off the jacket that said: “ I’m wild, I’m alone and put on the nice blue uniform of a convict!” (act 2, scene 1, p. 76)

Vee shows the religious structure that belongs to this feature (dynamism), when she talks about the Jesus Christ:

“I heard this clap of thunders! sky! I saw, I tell you, I saw the Two Huge Blazing Eyes of Jesus Christ Risen! Not crucified but Risen! I mean Crucified and the Risen! His hand! – Invisible! I didn’t see his hand!- But it touched me- here!” (act 3, scene 2, p. 115)

Based on these features of Expressionist drama, the play of Williams’ “Orpheus Descending” was analysed, which it can help for reading and comprehending the plays of this types.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, Expressionist drama has some essential features for analyzing and understanding expressionist works, such as Williams play’s “Orpheus Descending”. As it is seen, in this play, these features like; dream, dynamism, monologue, and scream can be traced and found, which the play was realized and analysed as a expressionist work.

Expressionism flourished in central Europe from about 1900 to 1935, to turn against the objective representation of nature and society express subjective or inner “reality”. Not only this movement holds Williams’ works but also it consists of the American and European writers’ works. Furthermore, the works of some famous authors as James Joyce, W. H. Auden, or O’neill can be mention based on this literary movement. Thus, this pattern of analyses will be used for further research of literary criticism and also literary analysis.

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