



EXPRESSIONISM IN THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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ABSTRACT

Expressionism is an art movement dating from 1920's especially in drama and painting. It is different from impressionism in the sense that its aim is to express an intellectual idea whereas impressionism is concerned only with pure vision and not with intellectually apprehended facts. Later on it got changed and was known for other implications in the development of different arts. This art of the twenties "manifested itself in painting and music, as well as in literature where its persistent influence has been in the theatre."¹ In drama it is characterized by unusualness and freedom of subject-matter and treatment in order to express an intellectual idea. Its form is usually symbolist. Ultimately this term expressionism was adopted by those writers who turned their path from traditional realism.

INTRODUCTION

The term expressionism is defined as "a movement in the arts emphasizing the free expression of the artist's subjective, emotional responses to objects and events, rather than their objective representation, characterized by extortion or exaggeration, of natural forms and intensification of color for purpose of expression."² One of the chief aspects of literature that was mainly dominated by this movement was theatre. The first recognized expressionist play-wright was August Strindberg of Sweden, who revealed his subjectivity through various symbols of the stage. On the whole it was the break through the traditional realism of the theatre. This reactionary movement against realism was manifested in different ways by different writers. Germans introduced modern devices. Their characters "were types, each representative of many men, and others endeavored to concentrate in a few patterned phrases what might have had to be wisely expressed in hundreds or thousands of words."³

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Tennessee Williams is one of the leading 20th century American dramatist who used this technique in his plays to present the intellection idea before the audience. Expressionism in drama stands for objectifying what is subjective through symbols and other resources of the stage like marks, tricky light, special make-up, etc. to express the inner tense of the characters. To abandon the traditional realism in theatres, it was inevitable to make certain changes in the mode and method of presentation. And that curiosity gave birth to expressionism, which was accepted by many dramatists of that time. They “dislocated the time sequence, wrote a stylized dialogue used marked characters and violently distorted stage – sets and exploited such modern devices as the revolving stage and the special effects in lighting and sound.”⁴ This mode of drama had an important influence on the American theatre.

Although expressionism was popular in the American theatre in the 1920's, its techniques having been harmonized with both the drama and the film were familiar to dramatists of later period. Presenting human frustration perversion and sexual maladjustment on the stage, was a difficult task. Tennessee Williams projected the objective ideas through the expressionistic and naturalistic device on the stage. Early plays of Tennessee Williams reveal the influence of the dramatic method, popularized by the expressionistic movement. The use of theatrical elements settings, props, lighting, music, sound effect was not merely a background for the effect but a symbolic manifestation of the inner truth. Three of Williams plays *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Street Car Named Desire* and *Camino Real* are true representatives of that expressionistic form in the sense that they dramatize the internal actions of characters. Williams *Battle of Angels* and *You Touched Me* employ the trapping of expressionism without accomplishing the purpose of revealing the inner life. The plays under reference are true expressionistic plays because they describe internal actions through free representation of objective facts.

In the production note of *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams lay emphasis on the necessity for the play wrights to abandon exhausted connections of photographic realism in the theatre and to substitute for them newer techniques' such as those of expressionism. “Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama”, he writes “have only one valid aim and that is a close approach to truth.”⁵

The Glass Menagerie is the first of his plays which is expressionistic in method and Williams uses various devices like light, music, sound and even a slide screen to have a closer approach to the internal state of the characters. So far as the resources of the stage are concerned, the screen device music the lightness all are helpful in the expressionistic production of the play. During the play a constant tune “*The Glass Menagerie* gives the emotional emphase to suitable passages. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the

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underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow.”⁶ On the whole these expressionistic devices are immensely helpful in the presentation of the plays as a memory play through expressionism. The play founded a new form of expression in drawing a true picture of the realities of the expressionism of the middle class life after the World War II.

Camino Real is the next play by Williams in which he used the expressionistic form in its extended form after *The Glass Menagerie*. In other words this form is completely revived in the play. Once again from a post war dramatist the American stage has such a play like Camino Real in which meaning devices more from symbols than from actions. In this play Williams has used a large number of symbols to make his objective clear. On the use of symbols he says “to me using a symbol is just a way of saying a things more vividly and dramatically than I could otherwise.”⁷ In *Camino Real* the use of expressionism tends towards investigation of human psyches.

The purpose of using such a newer technique by Williams is to suggest the inner reality that lie beneath the surface of life. No other form could have been so successful in its presentation as the above mentioned one. The playwright, ignoring the outer facts, is mainly concerned with idea. The scenes of the above play are out of order not waited in a sequence. The dislocation of time is also an important factor in the play. According to Williams, to present the reality of life, it was necessary to achieve such a freedom in its presentation. The playwright too seems to be very much enthusiastic when he bursts out “My desire was to give these audiences my own sense of something wild and unrestricted that my own sense in the mountains or clouds changing shape in the gale or the continually dissolving and transforming images of a dream.”⁸

His next two plays *Summer* and *Smoke and A Street Car Named Desire* aim at the showing of conflict between the spiritual and the physical side of man’s nature. In these plays the two popularized forms of Williams- allegorical and expressionistic are found in the abstracted form. In *Summer* and *Smoke*, physical and spiritual side of man’s nature is presented through symbols. The basic human need of flesh and spirit, when unsatisfied, leads towards perversion. Alma tries to attain the spiritual side of love but in vain. She is mentally distarted and put in an intangible world. The inner tension of Alma is successfully presented by the playwright with the help of symbols. Williams uses the various forms of stage devices, music being an important one to underwrite the thoughts of the characters. However the play may be regarded as successful in its expressionistic presentation.

Undoubtedly *Summer* and *Smoke* is not so successful in its form as *A Street Car Named Desire*. The play got a big success at the theatre. In the play from the very beginning we become familiar with the intuition of the dramatist. The opening lines of Blanch Dubious- “They told me to take a streetcar named Desire and then transfer to one called sometimes and

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ride six block and get off at- elysian fields”⁹, indicate that the playwright symbolically stresses the significance of the play. Blanch’s fugitiveness arises the leved of mental distortion. She is rather delicate and fragile in her thinking. On the other hand Stanley is a representative of rough, brutal and animal farce. The play is an expressionistic one because it tries to explore the inner of the characters with the help of various devies used by Williams.

To conclude William’s early plays are deeply influenced by expressionism. He is known as the pioneer in the use of this newer technique in the American theatre which influenced other American playwright of the twentieth century also. Arthur Miller and Thornton Wilder – the two contemporary American playwrights have popularized this technique in *Death of a Salesman* and in the *Skin of our Teeth* respectively. Williams too, known as the most subjective playwright of the time, accepted expressionistic form as a means to present the inner realities of life backed up by an intellectual idea.

REFERENCES

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² New Webster’s Dictionary, p 547

³ Nicoll, Allardyce, “The expressionistic School“ in British Drama (published by George G. Harrap and co.ltd 1925) P.483

⁴ A Glossary of literary Terms, op. cit. p.57

⁵ The Glass Menagerie, (published by Martin Secker and working Ltd. London. 1957) p. IX-X

⁶ I did . p.XI

⁷ Donahue, Francis, “Camino Real” in The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams Published by Frederick Unger Publishing Co. New York, 1964). P.59

⁸ Camino Real (Published by Penguin Books ltd. Middlesex. England, 1959) p.119

⁹ A Street Car Named Desire (Published by Penguin Books ltd. Middlesex. England, 1959) p.117