



## **WILLIAM SAROYAN'S DRAMATIC SKILL IN MAKING THE CHARACTERS CROSS THE DISTURBED SEA WITH A HOPEFUL HEART: AN APPRAISAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper is an attempt to present William Saroyan's dramatic skill in creating the characters who crosses the borders with a hopeful heart. Analyzing the plays written by Saroyan, it is shown how he proved the possibility of living from extracting the courage and spirit from the soul. He compares the hopeful hearts with wandering clouds which easily crossed the horizons in the sky. The themes and plot constructions of Saroyan reveal that he was motivated by the study of humanistic psychology and the dynamic potential for self-actualization. Thus, this paper portrays how he eliminated the problems and the element of tension through his plays.*

**Key Words:** *self-actualization, humanist psychology, psychology, philosophical concerns, sentimentality, existence.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

William Saroyan might well be called the Robin Goodfello among modern American playwrights. Even though the locale of his play is far removed from the woodlands scene, his Pukish humour and abundant good nature in the face of economic depression and the impending doom of war do provide the atmosphere of a summer idyll in a San Francisco honky-tonk setting. Like Eugene O'Neill, Saroyan knew that scene by heart, from firsthand experience. From Fresno, the ugly little city containing the large comic world, he had migrated to the metropolis on the Pacific before coming to the one on the Atlantic and was well acquainted with the honky-tonk way of life on San Francisco's water front when he came to dramatize it for the Broadway Theatre.

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William Saroyan was a most promising early discovery of the theatre of nineteen-forties. When Saroyan made his strange debut as a playwright, in the spring of 1939, he was already well known as an original short-story writer. He had no expressed uninhibited opinions on art and life and had declared himself as the original genius in the land. With the Group Theatre Production in 1939 of the long one-act play, 'My Heart's in the Highlands' Saroyan become the most controversial figure on the American Scene; Saroyan provoked further discord himself with his sensation – seeking antics and public define of critics. To those who were in sensitive to his play, he recommended “rest, recreation and reading” (Lewis 75). Quite untouched by a changing world situation and undaunted by adverse criticism, Saroyan continued to be a prolific writer. The casual, explorative improvisation in dramatic writing is increasingly evident. Saroyan is gifted enough impulsive bursts to rise above the saccharine facility-tale level and cloak his work with fantasy and fable.

Saroyan was born of American percentage in Fresno, California, and was educated at Fresno Grammar School, where he was anything but a model pupil. Taking as his subjects himself and the people he knew, he began to produce generally disorganized but surprisingly fresh stories. For Saroyan, who had not studied writing but had read voluminously and discriminately, literary composition and later on, playwriting, held no mysteries. His rules, the first of which he claimed to have discovered at the age of eleven, were:

*“Do not pay attention to the rules other people make.... Forget everybody who ever wrote anything..... learn to type write, so you can turn out stories as fast as Zane Grey” (Gassner 1016)*

As for playwriting, his considered advice to the young was not to take George Pierce Baker's course at Harvard but to look at the world, to write a great deal without ever being careful, and never try to achieve a style, because style is something which is there from the beginning and doesn't have to be achieved. A playwright's sole aim should be to uncover the magnificent and unending drama in the most ordinary environments, events and people. As John Gassner puts it, “His world, was a world of plain and poor people, broken-down houses, casualness, good health, poverty and uproarious laughter” (P 1016)

Like Vandeville, Saroyan's plays were briskly spontaneous, disjointed and improvisatory. A freedom from the reins of practical reality and normal logic characterized most of his works; a madcap fancy, combined with indefinable, ran intimation, riot in them; and the plays, composed at incredible speed, sometimes gave the impression of having come from their author almost automatically. In these respects, Saroyan's plays can be called “surrealist” and they are, indeed the best representation of this modern style in English-language drama. But Saroyan's writing was native and impulsive rather than borrowed and barked; it was definitely not patterned after the subjective style of the French cult. Vanderille exerted the



most considerable influence in his work. For Saroyan, this kind of sketchy writing was “realistic” in the sense that he did not contrive it but set down what he saw or impulsively felt.

Saroyan was among the first Americans to become comfortable with surrealism. And a decade before the works of Ionesco, Adamov and Beckett, he was already writing powerful “absurd” plays, later, Saroyan was to be closely attracted to Beckett and the theatre of the absurd because of his own techniques and dramatic vision, too sophisticated and complex for Broadway in the 1940’s became the substance of serious theatre in the 1950’s. perhaps the most significant aspect of Saroyan’s growth as a writer during this period was his exploration of art and its relationship to the process of becoming one’s true self. He returned repeatedly to the role of the artist for the contemporary society, developing and refining his most powerful portraits of the artistic sensibility came out of personal experience – his meeting with Jean Sibelius in July 1935.

Saroyan pointed out very neatly that man’s hope is for meaning, which is everything and he achieves meaning, inventing it or discovering it, through art. For him, as for Nietzsche, art is the highest metaphysical activity of man. It gives one a feeling of connection to power, meaning, truth, holiness – to the deepest hidden reaches of life’s mystery. The meaningfulness of the “real world” that is meaningful and the disorder of experience that is orderly are precisely what he seeks to overcome, indeed to redeem, through art. Saroyan’s desire to achieve unification of the warring opposites of self and world through paratactic concerning the place of language in the transformation of consciousness. For him, it was impossible to express the fluctuating rhythms of selfhood in the typical language of his day. The Heraclitean flux of being cannot be transfixed; thus it is essential to invent a malleable and fluid style which renders the immediacy of life as experienced in the timeless moment. For Saroyan, “a writer is great in so far as he is simultaneously artful and artless, a swift-moving inhabitant of both the inevitable and visible world and the uncreated but creatable, uncharted, invisible, fluid, limitless but nevertheless real other world” (Calonne 33). Though the world depicted by the artist is “uncharted” and “invisible”, it is nevertheless available to consciousness and must be poetically, lyrically invoked through rhythmic, musical language. In this way, Saroyan became a literary god-father to the Beat Generation specifically to Jack Kerouac and his fellow writers. Literature for both Saroyan and the Beats should be as immediate, visceral, improvisatory and spontaneous as the experience of hearing great music. It has to be realized, like life itself in performance; to make it breathe. He emphasizes the fact that the writer’s task is to help both himself and his public attain inner wholeness:

*“May be art is a correction of errors, within  
the artist, in the world, in man, in the  
universe” (Calonne 34)*



When Saroyan turned seriously to the writing of drama in 1939, he continued his search for self-realization in the modern world. In plays like **My Heart's in the Highland** and **The Time of Your Life** he sought to depict the deepest spiritual need of contemporary humanity – the desire to discover a way to live life meaningfully. The implicit question posed by his plays to:

*“How might we best live in order to fulfill  
our most profound potential as  
human being” (P 71)*

Play after play, Saroyan attempted to reveal the world as a place of mysterious beauty and pain in which the individual struggles for psychological integration. The process of achieving wholeness is rarely easy for his questing characters; as we could see, the plays gain their possibilities of fulfilled selfhood and the actual suffering and disharmony of the world. In the worlds of Heinrich Straumann, “Saroyan’s plays were like dramatized fairy tales without plots. He feels that the conflict between reality and imagination is solved by the absolute reality and imagination is solved by the absolute supremacy of the world of fantasy transforming everyday life into a succession of dream-like moment of kindness and joy” (9). Yet it is simply not the case that the “world of fantasy” achieves “absolute supremacy” in Saroyan’s plays, rather, the play strikes a delicate balance between imagination and reality, one realm always subtly impinging on the other. For from replacing reality with pure imagination, Saroyan repeatedly depicts the two realms in a state of dynamic tension. The “two theatres”, imagination and reality, the inner world and the outer world are represented symbolically in the actual scenic design of his drama. In his successive life are dramatically juxtaposed. For example, the poor families ‘My Heart’s in the Highlands, and ‘The Beautiful People’ are enclosed within the fragile shelter of their homes, where they seek to affirm the values of love and beauty. In **The Time of Your Life**, lonely refugees from the world’s unrest find a temporary home in Nick’s pacific street Saloon, Restaurant and Entertainment palace. These plays, then can not be branded “fairy tales”. On the contrary, Saroyan sought to depict the difficult struggle of the sensitive individual yearning for a home constantly threatening and an increasingly hostile universe. The noisy chaos of a “culture near bankruptcy” is often heard rumbling at the periphery of Saroyan’s delicately poised dramatic world – a real universe, indeed, in the Saroyanesque interpretation of the term.

Saroyan’s first play was **Subway Circus** (1935) was nothing but a collection of scenes conveying people’s day dreams, connected only by the circumstances that the characters happened to be riding in the subway. Encouraged to continue playwriting, Saroyan completed his first full-length play, **The Time of Your Life** in six days of furious writing. It was produced in the fall of 1939 by Edie Dowling and the Theatre Guild, ran the greater part of the season in New York, toured extensively, and won both Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. **My Heart’s in the Highlands** is the simplest and perhaps the best example



of Saroyan's style of playwriting. Except for a few maladroit passages, **My Heart's in the Highlands** has been written in a single vein as a work inviolable innocence. Though the author's innocence does not exclude the realities of poverty and of old age, the play is a paean to man's impulsive love of beauty, to kindness and dignity among the obscure, and to the wondering faith that children reveal. The play is sentimental without apology and optimistic without reason- attributes which, incidentally, Saroyan could claim for the greater part of the human race. George Nathan observes:

*"The fable of tenth-rate poet whose protective little boy worships him as a genius appeals more readily to the heart than to the mind" (12)*

John Gassner says: "There is more human pressure per square foot in it" (1017)

The play expressed a diffuse Whitmanesque spirit, a poetic caprice that requires no more explanations than does the taste of food and drink. The thoughts uttered by the characters are less important than those they do not or are unable to put into words. For all its simplicity, **My Heart's in the Highlands** therefore demands considerable empathy and theatrical imagination and the argument about it leads nowhere. The play is liked in so far as it is experience; it is disliked in so far as it is not experienced. The pre-occupation with food in this play might be interpreted by a psychoanalyst as an "oral regression". Curiously enough, Saroyan is said to have objected to the stylization of the Group Theatre production and defended to play's realism.

After the critical acclaim for the play **My Heart's in the Highlands** Saroyan is purposed to have turned out his 'first full-length play, **The Time of Your Life**. This play contains much original characterization and compassion for the frustrations of the common man and woman. **The Time of Your Life** is pervaded by Saroyan's dream of innocence, his sentimentalized feeling that the little people are spiritually beautiful. The childish wish-fulfillment prevails – Joe is a magic of all good, a father-image of not The Father. Joe illustrates through his actions the theme of the play, staled at the beginning in an eloquent stage direction:

*"In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile to the infinite delight and mystery of it" (P 15)*

All ends happily with Saroyan condoning murder it necessary to prevent people from adding to the misery of the world. **The Time of Your Life** had been widely accepted as the best of Saroyan's plays at it is a play of our time for the people in the play are those one is likely to see any day in almost any part of America, certainly atleast in certain types of American



places. The peculiar spell exerted by **The Time of Your Life** consisted in its sustaining the illusion of friendliness and muzzy election and gentle sentimentality which a certain amount of beer of riye will bring on in a faovuriate bar. Saroyan takes us to the bear, and he creates for us there a world which is the way the world would be if it conformed to the feelings instilled by drinks. In a world, “Saroyan achieves the feast of making and keeping us boozy without the use of alcohol and purely by the action of art” (Wilson 697).

The play expresses what its best people feel; it is a wonderful world, after all, as lerup the cop puts it, but in our weakness and fear we make the mess of things; sometimes we have to kill to preserve its goodness” (Floan 106)**The Time of Your Life** may not be considered a “well-made play” but it most certainly is a beautifully and earnestly made literary composition, which is capable of evoking emotion’s pity, sadness and love. The great and wise George Pierce Baker, teacher of many outstanding American dramatists, states clearly and unmistakably thus: “A play exists to create emotional response in the audience” (Joseph 223). The fact that no sensitive play goser can escape being moved emotionally by Saroyan’s play is something undeniable.

Joe provides the central reference point of the play, but the play is not about Joe, or about any other of its characters. It is about a state of mind, illusive but real, whose more readily recognizable components are, first, an awareness of American’s youth – its undisciplined, swaggering, unregulated early life. Secondly, a pervasive sense of America in crisis: an American of big business of labour strife, of depersonalized government and above all, of imminent war. Implicit is the suggestion that if the nation survives, it will do so by reaffirming certain qualities of its youth and by solving the problems from below; through awareness and good-will on the part of the little people. **The Time of Your Life** is very much a play writing the end of an era; it attempts to preserve the memory of a moment in history, a moment of hopeful time poised preciously at the edge of apocalypse. Saroyan has pointed out that “the shadow of the impending war” broods over the entire play. Alcohol transforms Joe’s experience of time and eases his sense of spiritual vacuity. The slow, meaningless movement of time drives him to the evation of drinking; he wants to live in the time of this life. The relationship between time and the struggle for true being is a central philosophical concern of the play. The use of the word ‘time’ in the title alerts us to its double literal and metaphysical significance: the time of your life. It is noteworthy that the horse that Joe’s factotum Tom wants to bet on is named ‘Precious Time’. Through these suggestive details, as well as through the explicit commentary of Joe on the problem of time, it is evident that Saroyan seeks to show that the world of “reality” must be transcended – his characters must release themselves from the shackles of time in order to achieve authentic being. Time should be experienced as a vital, eternal, fluid dimensions of life, rather than as a constricting, static, sterile realm of death. The author’s ideas about time are directly related to his vision of the self, for he sees its quest for integration as a dynamic, ongoing process of growth and transformation.



Dreams are affirmed throughout the play for life is impossible without their power to encourage and heal. Joe, Harry, Elsie and Dudley, Kitty Duval all are dreamers whose hearts are full of a profound spiritual yearning. Saroyan presents simple solutions to life's problems. Perhaps the lack of formal training in the humanities and social studies permits him to see relatively easy solutions to the troubles besetting us today.

*“If Love reigned, if we let the other man live, if we stopped now and then to enjoy some of the endless glories of Nature, life would not be so difficult, says Saroyan. How simple how true and how hard to realize” (Joseph 224).*

The plays leaves us delicately poised between what and what – not, between life and death, between affirmation and despair. The death of Bick, symbol of authority and the forces of regression and the escape of Kitty and Tom resolves the plot happily. Saroyan despises violence and hates bitterly those who perpetrate and practice it.

*“The injury of a living man's small finger I regard as infinitely more disastrous and Ghastly than his natural death” (P 212)*

But the murder of Blick carries in it a suggestion that sometimes we have to kill to preserve the world's goodness. In this casual and unexpected murder of Blick runs a strong note of affirmation for Saroyan's little and beautiful people' who are content with their dreams and hopes and who, according to Saroyan, should not be disturbed on any account for Saroyan's says,

*“I am interested in Man” (Myself upon Earth 212)*

Like Jean-Paul Sartre, Saroyan sees man as “Project” rather than as a static, defined “object”. Man creates himself and his meaning in the very act of living, in the quality of “performance”. Joseph Wood Krutch, comments on the uniqueness of Saroyan thus:

*“He accepts the universe believes in the goodness of the human heart, and holds that God is love. He distrusts the respectable, rejoices in the variety of the world, believes in the unique individual....” (P 113)*

No doubt, Saroyan ranged himself on the side of the common people:

*“No ambition for the living, for the individual*



for the weak, and stupid and the strong  
and wise is loftier than nine. No affection  
for the ugly and base and the beautiful  
and noble in man is more generous than  
nine” (P 9)

In his plays, Saroyan poses some problems and there is an element of tension. The cloud crosses the horizon easily and the characters cross the disturbed sea with a hopeful heart. He has proved the possibility of ‘living’ by extracting as much courage and spirit from his honky-tonk habitués as anyone could wish. “He had a salve for humanity, which one may denote according to taste, benevolence or sentimentality” (Gassner 298) and for good measure, Saroyan spun a world in which everything was possible. To conclude, Saroyan’s themes and plot constructions reveal that he has been motivated to delve deep on an experimental study of humanistic psychology in which personality is a dynamic integral system with an open potential for self-actualisation.

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