

Essay on Expressionism in American Drama

Expressionism is a broader movement that envelops many different art forms. It was at the beginning of the 20th century that expressionism started as a modernist movement in the field of drama and theatre. It has its roots first in Europe and then it came to America. In Europe itself, Germany was the first place from where expressionism evolved as a theatre movement. In Germany, Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller were strong supporters and also the practitioners of this movement. Besides Kaiser and Toller, Reinhard Sorge, Walter Hasenclever, Hans Henny Jahnn, and Arnolt Bronnen are the other significant contributors to the Expressionistic theatre of Germany. In fact, the writers of this school “looked back to the Swedish playwright, August Strindberg and German actor-dramatist, Frank Wedekind as the precursors of their dramaturgical experiments.”

The first Expressionist play that was performed in Vienna was *Murderer, the Hope of Women* by a well-known dramatist, Oskar Kokoschka. It entered into the theatre on July 4, 1909 and shook many traditional concepts of dramaturgy. The play presented “an unnamed man and woman struggle for dominance. The Man brands the woman; she stabs and imprisons him. He frees himself and she falls dead at his touch.” The spectators are shocked when they witness the man slaughtering everybody around him at the end of the play. The play became noteworthy because of “the extreme simplification of characters to mythic types, choral effects, declamatory dialogue and heightened intensity” which later became characteristic features of Expressionist plays. The success of *Murderer* led to the writing of the first full-length Expressionist play named, *The Son* by Walter Hasenclever. Though published in 1914, it reached to the theatre only in 1916.

However it has to be taken into consideration that Expressionism was just one more technique of writing a play and any attempt to take extremist position would be worthless. A comparative study of Realism and Expressionism as the techniques of drama writing shows that there was every possibility of stretching both of them to the extremes. The best known examples of these extremes are Ibsen and Brecht. Here it has to be taken into consideration that “great drama could be produced either way or by combining both modes, as Tennessee Williams was to do with brilliant success in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Arthur Miller in *The Death of a Salesman*.”

The works of the practitioners of Expressionism were being published in *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*, two reputed journals of the time. The regular contributors of *Der Sturm* were Richard Dehmel, Alfred Döblin, Max Brod, Knut Hamsun, René Schickele, Arno Holz, Karl Kraus, Selma Lagerlöf, Adolf Loos, Heinrich Mann, Paul Scheerbarth, and Peter Altenberg. These writer published their poems and prose works in this journal. *Der Sturm* also spared space for “the writings, drawings, and prints from Kokoschka, Kandinsky, and members of *Der blaue Reiter*.”

Oskar Kokoschka wrote his playlet, *Murderer, The Hope of Women* in 1909 which is generally considered to be the first expressionist play. In this play, Oskar Kokoschka presents the story of “an unnamed man and woman struggle for dominance. The man brands the woman; she stabs and imprisons him. He frees himself and she falls dead at his touch.” The spectators are shocked to witness the man slaughtering everybody around him at the end of the play. This play exhibited many of the features of Expressionist play. These features are “the extreme simplification of characters to mythic types, choral effects, declamatory dialogue and heightened intensity.”

Expressionism dominated the German theatre of the early 20th-century. The main dramatists of this period were Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller. They were followed by other dramatists like Walter Hasenclever, Hans Henny Jahnn, Arnolt Bronnen and Reinhard Sorge. In America, Expressionism had its followers in Eugene O’Neill, Elmer Rice and Sophie Treadwell. Eugene O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape*, *The Emperor Jones* and *The Great God Brown*, Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* and Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* are some of the brilliant plays written in Expressionist tradition.

A close analysis of Expressionist plays shows that they “often dramatise the spiritual awakening and

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sufferings of their protagonists." Some of these plays have an episodic dramatic structure and they are known as Stationendramen meaning "station plays, modeled on the presentation of the suffering and death of Jesus in the Stations of the Cross." Such type of plays present "the struggle against bourgeois values and established authority, frequently personified by the Father." This form of play was popularized by August Strindberg. His autobiographical trilogy *To Damascus* is a well-known example of such play.

It is observed that the speech in Expressionist drama is "either expansive and rhapsodic, or clipped and telegraphic."

The people closely related with the movement of Expressionism are Director Leopold Jessner, the Symbolist director and designer, Edward Gordon Craig, playwrights Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, Reinhard Sorge, Bertolt Brecht, Seán O'Casey, Eugene O'Neill, Elmer Rice, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Samuel Beckett, poets Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benn, Georg Heym, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ernst Stadler, August Stramm, and Rainer Maria Rilke, and the novelists Alfred Döblin, and Franz Kafka.