

Expressionism – theatre styles essay sample

[Literature](#), [Drama](#)



Expressionism is an attempt to discover a technique and method which will express what the dramatist imagines the inner reality of his drama to be, more perfectly and impressively than any of the other dramatic styles of theatre are capable of doing. The dramatist attempts to show not objective but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events awaken in them.

The Expressionist theatre movement developed in Germany around 1905. It was characterised by attempts to dramatise of set, which held a strong symbolic meaning. Expressionist playwrights tried to convey the dehumanising aspects of 20th century German theatre of which Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller were the most famous playwrights. They looked back to Swedish playwright, August Strindberg and German actor and dramatist, Frank Wedekind as ancestors of their dramaturgical experiments. Other early expressionist playwrights include Elmer Rice, Karel Capek, Eugene O'Neill and Hans Henry Jahnn.

The traditional audiences for this kind of theatre were, to put it bluntly, socialist hippies. They were home in Germany during wartime and expressed their political ideals by attending and performing in these somewhat underground playhouses.

After WW1, materials became once more available to the arts and expressionist directors used large and elaborate sets which added extra dimensions to the genre, like screening images onto the stage or having moving sets.

Oskar Kokoschka's 1909 playlet 'Murder, The Hope of Women' is often called the first expressionist play. In it an un-named man and woman struggle for control. The man brands the woman; she stabs and imprisons him. He frees himself and she falls dead at his touch. At the play ends, he slaughters everything and everyone around him. The extreme simplification to mythic types, harmonic effects and heightened intensity all would become characteristics of later expressionist plays.

Expressionism is a protest, on the one hand, against the sentimental unrealities of Romanticism and, on the other hand, against the tendency of realism [or naturalism] to satisfy itself with a careful representation of the surfaces of life, the speech habits, manners, emotions and ideas of one or another class in society. Narrowly, expressionism reveals the influence on the drama of the current concern with the rich and complex, conscious and subconscious experience of modern personalities, and at the same time it betrays the impatience of dramatist and producer with the restraint of late 19th century naturalist staging, and an interest to use to the full the tremendous of modern theatrical actions and lighting, and to project through concepts of an experimental drama.

Expressionism encourages the freest possible handling of styles or tones. In the same way, we are able to find sudden and sometimes strange shifts from verse to style, from objective realism to highly subjective monologue, from predictable realistic dialogue to monosyllable sound. Since the importance is on essential experiences of individuals or masses, there is an expressionist drama tendency to simplify the plot, to minimize objective action, in case

attention is unfocused from major issues. To emphasise the general meaning of the themes developed, characters are likely to be represented as types in order to reduce individuality and to highlight typicality. They are represented in a stylised, distorted manner with the intention of producing emotional shock.

Tennessee Williams' play, "The Glass Menagerie" contains characters which reflect his own family. Laura, the crippled daughter, was like Tennessee's sister Rose, who suffered from mental illnesses. She began to live in her own world of glass ornaments. Laura's desire to lose her world was a characteristic of his own sister. Both Laura and Rose were seen as shy, quiet but lovely girls who were not able to cope with the modern world. Amanda resembles his mother; a Southern and imaginative woman who was very encouraging. She does not allow time to be wasted and wishes the best for her children. Tom Wingfield, the son of Amanda and younger brother of Laura, re-echo's the struggles and aspirations of Tennessee himself, only in literary form.

"The Glass Menagerie" contains realistic and expressionistic elements as it was written at a point of transition between the two different dramatic periods. In the production notes, Tennessee Williams describes expressionism in *The Glass Menagerie* as "a closer approach to the truth." By this he meant the truth about life and reality. He uses different expressionistic devices such as irony to put across the themes of the play; escape, reality and memory.

Expressionist dialogue moves towards a sort of telegraphic tone and style which intends to give the impression that everything except the basics of human speech has been cut away. The sentence disappears, and phrases or repeated words serve for communication. There has been, likewise, a re-appearance of the monologue, which is obviously great at assisting the projection of subconscious material, but the expressionist monologue is more broken, incoherent and irrational than the traditional monologue.

It is the setting that exercises the strongest influence in expressionism. The tendency is to make the setting simple until it indicates the total basics of form and feature. The need of the expressionist playwright to objectify as expressively as possible the complex psychological states, particularly of an unusual sort, has driven them to utilise stage devices, similar in their excellent consistency to the devices of romantic staging, but dependent on the elaborate, careless resources of the modern theatre for realisation.

August Strindberg, a well known Swedish playwright combined both psychology and expressionist elements in his works. Key examples include continual allusions to mystical forces, the use of symbology and the construction of an absent, shadowy and yet swift centre of influence. *Miss Julie*, one of his best plays, is a psychological study of the seduction of an upper-class woman by an insensitive chauffeur. In the dramas of this period Strindberg began to experiment with visual effects and other aspects of dramatic form, starting changes that still remain living influences in the modern theatre. Expressionist dream sequences and symbolism were combined with realism and with religious mysticism.

In expressionist drama, the physical consequences of a distorted situation are followed through as if it were completely real. Expressionist writers divide over the final consequences of this. Personal tragedies usually end in the destruction of the character. However, when the focus is the state of society a positive ending can result, with the victory of traditional human values over domination and mass production.

Probably because of its abstract nature, expressionist theatre was very stimulating but did not thrive artistically. It is widely believed that expressionist theatre was over by 1925. Expressionist playwrights began to represent new cultural experiences by separating the theatrical languages of bodies, voices, and words. In doing so, they not only innovated a new dramatic form, but redefined playwriting from a theatrical craft to a literary art form.