

The ghost sonata essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

' It's strange how a story can be told in two such different ways'.¹ This is a comment spoken very early in *The Ghost Sonata*, by one of the central characters, and it seems to embody the problems of production that exist at the very heart of the play. The interpretation or presentation of any event depends very much on the motives and perceptions of the speaker. For a play like *The Ghost Sonata*, which is very minimalist in terms of explicit character and plot development, interpretation is left very much to the imagination of the audience and therefore there is no direct manner of presenting the play.

Strindberg wrote this play as a chamber play, intending it to be performed in his Intimate Theatre. He wrote it in the style of a sonata, hoping to place an emphasis on mood and atmosphere as opposed to character and plot. Thus the play moves in one transient piece, sustaining the audience's attention in the hypnotic fashion of a piece of music. Much symbolism is placed upon simple artefacts/moments within the play, and it is the producer's decision to exploit these things that determines the audience's grasp of the mood of the play.

Through careful use of language, Strindberg makes it virtually impossible for the producer to create a singular interpretation of any one moment within the play. Particularly important, Strindberg makes extensive use of the pause, in order to create an atmosphere full of foreboding and uncertainty. However the audience is never entirely sure of what the actual mood means. To them it is just a feeling. The producer cannot remove himself entirely from this ambiguity, but he can use other stage effects in order to manoeuvre the audience's reaction into a certain direction.

Therefore all characters within *The Ghost Sonata*, evade specific interpretation. The Student is the first character to speak within the play, and he is drawn instantly towards the figure of the milkmaid, of whom we are told in the casting list, is a vision. This raises the question as to whether or not the Student is a ghost himself - a matter that not even the Student appears to be sure of, as he says: ' I was there, you see, yesterday evening, when the house collapsed... now you know. '(scene 1).

The pause and the final three words of this statement - ' now you know ' seem to indicate an uncertainty in his own understanding of the declaration. The fact that he was in the house that collapsed could allude to the fact that now he is a ghost, the pause being reminiscent of his realisation of that. This would make his final three words an affirmation of his own disease.

Alternatively the Student could be aware that he is dead from the start and so the pause is a break to permit the Milkmaid time to understand why he can see her.

Opposite to either of these interpretations is the possibility that the student is not dead and the pause is emblematic of his own confusion - he is tired and weary from rescuing people and he is irritated at having to explain himself to the silent maid. His final three words therefore, become an attempt to complete a sentence and fill a gap, reiterating his annoyance with her lack of response to his story. This is an interpretation of realism. As the first scene progresses, certainty of who the student is, decreases rapidly, as Strindberg makes more extensive use of the pause.

Old Man Hummel recognises the Student from his account to the maid and the corresponding article on him in the newspaper. However, as he informs the Student of his sudden fame, he leaves a pause at the end of a sentence which leaves it ambiguous as to whether the student survived the accident or not: Old Man: ... I've just been reading about it in the paper... Student: Have they already got hold of it? Old Man: Yes, the whole story; and your picture as well, though they regret not having the name of the brave young student... (Scene 1)

The audience are left to use their imagination to complete the end of Hummel's sentence, the most likely close being about 'the brave young student' who died whilst saving others during the accident. However this is not confirmed and it is up to the producer to follow the concept more prominently of the student's death, or to leave it as a more vague and unestablished possibility. Similarly the figure of Hummel is an ambiguous figure. His utterances and those from others about him, can be construed in several different ways, so that the audience can never be sure of who he is.

One sentence seems to imply that he is a devil while at the same time having a rational explanation for him being an ordinary old man. When he remarks on the Student's pronunciation of the word 'window' (a word the Student has clearly not used), the audience could assume that Hummel is tricking the Student into a false familiarity with him. As Springchorn notes, Hummel is described later as a thief who enters through windows to steal human souls, and here we see him as he first steals into the Student's life by means of a "window". 2

In this context, the reference to a window has become symbolic of Hummel's entry into the Student's life, as a supernatural and surreal figure. However, at the same time as being suspicious, Hummel speaks a very rational sentence. He does not say that the student pronounced the word 'window', he says that he used to have a friend that spoke like the Student. The use of the word window, is merely a linguistic example to portray the difference of the usual dialect and the dialect of the Student and his Father. Thus the statement may be accepted in two very different ways.

It is up to the producer to use other effects in order to emphasize either of the two interpretations as being more likely. For example, if Hummel is dressed to slightly resemble the devil, more suspicion will be roused from his comment. This is true of any character within the play - it is up to the producer to work on various physical portrayals in accordance with specific interpretations of the language used. In one of Ingmar Bergman's three productions of Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*, he attempted to use the same actor to play the parts of both the Student and Hummel.

He found it impossible and the idea was soon discarded, but the fact remains that he saw a connection between the two. Towards the end of the play, the Student appears to be taking on the role of Hummel as he sucks Adele of her life, by revealing the reality to her and then watching her die. Bergman appears to consider the Student's relation to Hummel as sinister, but another interpretation could regard it as a relation of opposites. In revealing the truth to Adele, the Student desires to help her remove herself from the corrupt and draining house - a concept that she is not familiar with and therefore can not encompass as a living entity.

Therefore perhaps it would be more apt to double the acting of Hummel and the Cook, who are verbally noted as being related and both appear to have the same function: Student: Who is that monstrous woman [ref. To Cook] Young Lady: One of the Hummels - a vampire; she's devouring us... (Scene 3) Where the Cook literally consumes all the goodness of the food she presents to the family, physically diminishing them, Hummel metaphorically consumes their souls, degenerating their minds and will to live.

In another of his more successful attempts at directing *The Ghost Sonata*, Bergman uses the same actress for Adele and the Mummy, positioning them at times to reflect the statue. Thus Bergman creates a link between the two generations, their state of decay and the ideal - the statue, which cannot be revived into life. The only information that Strindberg supplies about the appearance of the statue is that it is white and 'beautiful' (according to the Student), therefore its position and appearance is left to the imagination of the director.

It could stand as a beautiful young woman - exactly like Adele, but with its arms crossed over its chest, signifying its draining by the vampire - Hummel. Similarly it could look like both the Mummy and Adele, but be standing naturally, symbolising a life that can never exist again. There are infinite possibilities in the link between the three. As well as Adele and the Mummy, there is another generation of woman presented on the stage - the ex-fiancée of Old Hummel. She is noted at the very beginning of the play by Hummel and the Student, as Hummel forces the Student to recognise her former beauty:

Old Man: ... can you see that this old woman was once young and beautiful?

Student: No, I can't. Although yes, there's something about her expression, but I can't see her eyes! (Scene 1) If the actress is not the same as the actress playing Adele and the Mummy, the face could be painted in the same manner in order to convey the sense of the generative degeneration occurring within the house. The fiancée is the final stage of decay in a life that represents the living dead. She completes the evolution of the living to the living-dead, of which the Statue, Adele and the Mummy are the precursors to.

The stove that sits at the back of the room - the stove that is drained of sustenance by the Cook, is white like the statue, and possibly also the three women. Therefore inanimate objects can be projected into the symbolism of characters. Similar to the statue, the Buddha ornament is closely related to the Student - symbolising his propensity to give (i. e. peace and beauty in the bulb that it holds), while taking nothing. The bulb that it holds is said to live without the sustaining elements of water or soil, thus the Buddha, like the Student, is not a vampire. Therefore perhaps the Buddha could be created to vaguely resemble the Student.

The final ambiguity occurs at the end of the play when the room and its inhabitants are dispelled by the advent of the bright light that permeates through, leaving an image of the ' Isle of the Dead' on stage. This final act may be regarded as light dispelling vampires, an awakening from a dream, or an ending of a play, all of which depend upon the thread in which the director has followed throughout. Fundamentally, The Ghost Sonata has a relatively tight structure, as it follows the movements closely of the musical

style (beginning with a quick allegro, continuing with a lower largo and finishing with a coda)³.

Strindberg has also provided close instructions for stage arrangement. Beyond this it is the responsibility of the director to emphasise one interpretation of the play over another. However as Springchorn says: 'absolute clarity would dispel meaning because a major concern of the play is our inability to know exactly what is going on in life'. Since *The Ghost Sonata* is a play that evades meaning, production will be a perpetual problem for the producers to tackle.