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The Concept of Survival in August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*

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Abstract

The Swedish well-known playwright August Strindberg (1849-1912) deals with the concept of survival of mankind in his masterpiece *A Dream Play* through suffering due to the difficult circumstances people worldwide face during their lifetime so that they finally can get relief. When writing *A Dream Play*, Strindberg was not acquainted with Sigmund Freud's conception of dreams but Freud as a specialist in the psychoanalysis is required for interpreting the real nature and structure of the play. For Freud, dreams which stem from the human subconscious are so significant in affecting and forming the individual personality and they also have the power to depict the manners and inclinations of the human being. In his play, Strindberg presents real tormented characters taken from almost all walks of life, striving for survival in spite of their problematic circumstances. In a Freudian sense, the play is considered a fulfillment of a wish that all people in the world should cast off their servitude to their illusions so that the spiritual values can be prevailed through increasing and improving of people thoughts and consciousness. Really the play is a call for mankind to go back to spiritual values such as love, peace, righteousness, truth and forgiveness in order to achieve peace of mind in this mortal world and in the hereafter.

El concepto de supervivencia en August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*

Resumen

El conocido dramaturgo sueco August Strindberg (1849-1912) aborda el concepto de supervivencia de la humanidad en su obra maestra *A Dream Play* a través del sufrimiento debido a las difíciles circunstancias que las personas en todo el mundo enfrentan durante su vida para que finalmente puedan obtener alivio. Al escribir *A Dream Play*, Strindberg no conocía la concepción de los sueños de Sigmund Freud, pero Freud como especialista en psicoanálisis es necesario para interpretar la naturaleza y estructura reales de la obra. Para Freud, los sueños que provienen del subconsciente humano son tan importantes para afectar y formar la personalidad individual y también tienen el poder de representar los modales e inclinaciones del ser humano. En su obra, Strindberg presenta personajes atormentados reales tomados de casi todos los ámbitos de la vida, luchando por sobrevivir a pesar de sus circunstancias problemáticas. En un sentido freudiano, la obra se considera un cumplimiento de un deseo de que todas las personas en el mundo desechen su servidumbre a sus ilusiones para que los valores espirituales puedan prevalecer aumentando y mejorando los pensamientos y la conciencia de las personas. Realmente la obra es un llamado a la humanidad a volver a valores espirituales como el amor, la paz, la rectitud, la verdad y el perdón para lograr la paz mental en este mundo mortal y en el más allá.

Introduction

A Dream Play (1901) is one of the big landmarks in the history of the English drama. It is written by the dramatist August Strindberg (1849-1912). The play appeared at a time when Strindberg was suffering a psychological crisis as he got a neurosis about not only his three failing marriages but also about his much hostility towards his family members, including his mother, sister and daughter, considering them his natural enemy. The impact of his hostility to women can be found in his writings such as his masterpiece *The Father* (1887) which assumes the ever-lasting conflict between the sexes (men and women). In the play, the Captain who is one of the most important protagonists and the victim of the heroine Laura, expresses Strindberg's real aggressive emotions towards his family female members as he says:

My mother did not want me to come into
The world because my birth would give
her pain. She was my enemy. She robbed
my embryo of nourishment, so I was born
incomplete. My sister was my enemy when
she made me knuckle under to her. The first
woman I took in my arms was my enemy.
she gave me ten years of sickness in return
for the love I gave her. When my daughter
had to choose between you and me, she
became my enemy. And you, you, my wife,
have been my mortal enemy, for you have
not let go until there is no life left in me.¹

Strindberg attributes his misogyny to his inner feelings of anxiety towards women when he admits that it is “only the reverse side of my fearful attraction towards the other sex.”² In fact, he is changeable in his emotions towards the other sex as he is always fascinated by women for their “maternal qualities” and he hates them for their “masculinity” because “he was always attracted to women he could love for their maternal qualities and hate for their masculinity, reacting to them with bewildering changeability.”³ Strindberg’s third wife, Harriet Bosse, confirms her husband’s changeability towards women when she frankly expresses her own feelings at Strindberg’s attitudes, saying: “I have a feeling that Strindberg reveled in meeting with opposition. One moment his wife had to be an angel. The next the very opposite. He was as changeable as a chameleon.”⁴ Besides, he hates liberated women whom “he detested for their masculinity, infidelity, competitiveness, and unmaternal attitudes,”⁵ and he at the same time loves “more motherly women (generally sexless) - such as Mamma Uhl, his mother in law, and the Mother Superior of the hospital of St. Loius,”⁶ for their compassion towards elderly and sick people.

After writing *The Father*, Strindberg wrote *Miss Julie* in which it seems that Strindberg is in control of his paranoia and this appears clearly in his perfect writing of the play mentioned above as it “is a decided advance in objectivity, generally free from the author’s paranoiac symptoms,”⁷ as Robert Brustein comments. Moreover, Strindberg shows clearly the domination of men over women in *Miss Julie* compared with his former play *The Father* whose protagonist was lacking a sufficient power to overcome his

fears of the heroine that caused his downfall. In *Miss Julie* Strindberg elevates the status of man over woman when Jean, the male protagonist, takes a complete control over himself and his surroundings, while the female character Julie who carries the title of the play fails or as Brustein puts it when he says that “The dramatic design of *Miss Julie* is like two intersecting lines going in opposite directions: Jean reaches up and Julie falls down.”⁸ It is important to mention that *Miss Julie* is united by the contradictory poetic metaphor which is the repeated dreams of the both male and female characters: “In Julie’s dream, she is looking down from the height of a great pillar, anxious to fall to the dirt beneath, yet aware that the fall would mean her death; in Jean’s, he is lying on the ground beneath a great tree, anxious to pull himself up from the dirt to a golden nest above”⁹

In *A Dream Play* which is the subject matter of this research paper, Strindberg obviously converted not only into Expressionism after most of his previous works were regarded as naturalistic when he tries to show people and things in a realistic way such as *The Father* and *Miss Julie* already mentioned above but also into feeling a more sympathetic view of women when he makes his protagonist in the current play a woman (*Indra’s Daughter*). Expressionism can be defined as “a movement in Germany very early in the 20th century (1905) in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality and, instead, to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world”¹⁰ Besides, it deals with man’s visions of the inner meaning of life which reveals the conflict inside human mind. Furthermore, expressionists oppose industrialism because they believe that the latter lessens the position of man to a “machine like creature” because man is the main concern of the interests of the expressionists and for them he is the superior creature who should endeavor to improve his situation after liberating himself from the chains of industrialism which enslaves him. Oscar G. Brockett confirms that:

Man is always the center of the expressionist’s interest. He is seen as being capable of nobility and as a creature who strives for greatness. but industrialism and science have kept man’s eyes on the ground and have reduced him to machine like creature through the ideals of mass production and conformity of behavior.¹¹

So, one can discern easily that the intention of the expressionism is to eliminate the cuffs of the industrialism which impairs man's ability to make progress throughout his lifetime.

Moreover, A Dream play shows the revolutionary spirit of Strindberg in the theatre of revolt when he exerts much effort in his writing to make man understand how to struggle against all kinds of adversity through resolution, steadfastness and will so that he can change himself and the others as well as the whole world for the better. Unfortunately, the glorification of man by the expressionists lost its effect after the First World War (1914-1918), because the latter proved the selfishness and the destructive motivations of man who should have spiritual and humanitarian aspects towards other people. Strindberg's other expressionistic works are *The Road To Damascus* (1898-1901), *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), and his last play *The Great Highway* (1909). The aforementioned plays are considered by their playwright to be "dream plays" because "they are alike in their use of free form, so close to the form of a dream, and in their languid abstractness: locations are vague; space is relative; chronological time is broken; and characters possess names like the Stranger, the Student, the Poet, the Hunter, and the Dreamer,"¹² as Robert Brustein puts it. It is noteworthy to mention that the dream plays as they have been described by Strindberg utilize a range of techniques to manifest samples taken from the real life dreaming about things they would like them to happen.

Discussion and Analysis

As the title suggests (*A Dream Play*), Strindberg confirms that life is just like a dream which is usually an imaginary series of events in which the imagination is activated and begins unconsciously to form new images or ideas in the mind of new pleasant or unpleasant things according to the dreamer's psychological condition after retrieving memories of past events which are either happy or sad, experiences and traumas that mixed together far away from time and space in the subconscious of the dreamer. Strindberg believes that unimportant background of events of someone occurred in the real life are naturally locked deep in the subconscious which motivates the memory to get them back through dreams or day-dreams to form new shapes. Psychologically speaking, Strindberg explains this idea

clearly when he speaks about *A Dream Play* and *The Road to Damascus*:

The Author has sought to imitate the
 Disconnected but apparently logical
 form of a dream. Anything can happen;
 everything is possible and plausible.
 Time and space do not exist. Upon an
 insignificant background of real life
 events the imagination spins and weaves
 new patterns; a blend of memories,
 experiences, pure inventions, absurdities,
 and improvisations.¹³ (*A Dream Play* and *Four Cham-*

ber Plays), p.19.

Strindberg believes that “the dream is usually painful, less frequently cheerful ... and ... tormenting.” (Ibid. p.19) Thus, all the characters in the play are depicted to be seriously depressed, suffering a great pain and discomfort and their expectations to achieve their desires and wishes are mere frightening and unpleasant dreams which cause a much pain and fear to the dreamer himself and “yet beyond them all lies the dreamer himself, seeing evil come of the incorporation of the pure intelligence in fleshly forms,”¹⁴ as Allardyce Nicoll remarks. The professor Evert Sprinchorn confirms that *A Dream Play* “develops into an anxiety dream, and ends like a nightmare.”¹⁵ In general if an individual wishes something, he impatiently would like to be true, even though he/she knows that it is impossible or unlikely. Sigmund Freud (1856-1839), a psychologist and the founder of the psychoanalysis attributes individual’s dreams or wishes to the “Libido” which is the part of the dreamer’s personality that is considered to cause his/her emotions and feelings especially sexual desires. Thus, he ascribes these dreams and wishes to the sexual condition of the dreamer which “corresponds to a libido deflected from its purpose and unable to find employment.”¹⁶ According to Freud’s saying, one can easily conclude that the unhealthy sexual relations with his wife Harriet may cause his pain, suffering and depression and these things are reflected in his current play which is ended in much pain, suffering and even death.

It is only natural for people who feel frustrated and hopeless to escape unconsciously into dreams or even into daydreams of things they would like eagerly to happen. Freud argues that “The unconscious is the true reality of the psyche.”¹⁷ Thus, the unconscious which is the part of the mind that contains feelings and ideas in which the human being does not know

about or cannot control stirs the brain to dream or imagine impossible desires and wishes to be hopefully achieved and this is the very thing which pushes Freud to believe in the power of dreams in forming the nature of the dreamer. Hence, Freud focuses on the unconsciousness rather than consciousness as he says that "the most complicated feats of thinking are possible without the participation of consciousness."¹⁸ Unluckily, the characters in the play could not achieve their dreams of getting a better life and their current lives are still gloomy. The characters in the play are real images taken from the real life and their miserable situation stimulates unconsciously not only spectators or readers but also the goddess Indra's daughter, the protagonist of the play, to feel dejected over their adversities and agonies. Thus, Indra's daughter as a goddess living in the heavens descends to the earth so that she can see by her own eyes the suffering of people as she has never experienced this kind of earthly life and has no idea what to expect. By using the mythological character, Indra's Daughter, Strindberg intends to say that even the heavens care and concern about the conditions of life on earth. The English critic Raymond Williams says that the play "is based on the familiar idea of the Goddess who descends to earth to discover the truth about the suffering of mankind."¹⁹

On earth The Daughter becomes incarnate as a pretty girl and has got married to the Lawyer, another character in the play. After marrying him and experiencing people's domestic life, the descending goddess feels that living on earth is unbearable especially she herself begins to suffer because she is currently a housewife who should look after her home and husband. However, the suffering of people is proved by The Daughter herself to be true, therefore, she tells her father about people's sufferings, asking him to have mercy upon them when she says "Eternal God, hear them! Life is evil! Human beings are to be pitied."²⁰ A good example of the difficult and miserable life on earth experienced by the Daughter is when the two newly married couple lives in a humble and an old small house, suffering from the coldness of the house, thus, Kristin, the maid, keeps gluing the fabric around the windows and closing the cracks and gaps in the walls to insulate the house from the coldness of the winter and to keep cold air out so that she can keep the house warm. This action makes The Daughter feels annoyed and irritated because she begins to feel choked while the lawyer is happy and contented because he cannot afford heating and this procedure costs him nothing. The conversation below explains the attitudes of each character in the house towards the episode of pasting:

Kristin: I paste! I paste!

Daughter: (pale and worn, is sitting by the stove):
 You're shutting out the air! I'm suffocating! ...
 Kristin: Now there's only one little crack left!
 Daughter: Air, air! I can't breathe!
 Kristin: I paste! I paste!
 Lawyer: That's right, Kristin! Heat is expensive!
 Daughter: It's as if you were gluing my mouth shut.²¹

The accident just mentioned above shows the contradiction of life when someone's happiness is the other's misery or as Raymond Williams puts it "the one's pleasure, the other's pain."²²

The miserable life on earth as depicted by Strindberg also hurts many other people from almost all walks of life such as the Officer who adheres himself to the dream of the returning of his beloved who left him years ago. For him, her returning may relieve much of his mental and physical pain especially when he is demoted to the position of a groom and her presence would colour the dullness of his dejected life. The Officer's dream is not fulfilled as his old love Victoria has never showed in the play, but he continues dreaming of her because his ever-lasting dreaming is his lonely consolation. Freud makes it clear when he says that: "The dream is the (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed, repressed) wish."²³

Strindberg's play also shows the meaninglessness of life which is later being the principle of the Theater of the Absurd whose drama intends to show the miserable and useless life of its characters. The rest of the characters which are almost from all walks of life in *A Dream Play* such as the Pensioner, the Billposter, the Fisherman, the Poet, Lina the maid, He and She, the Old Fop (Don Juan), Edith, and the doorkeeper suffer a lot. Some of them dream and wait for someone to come and save them from their misery while the others are tortured because of either by the absence of their lovers or by not getting what they really wish. In fact, wasting time as some characters do in the play, in waiting for others who will never show up is something tedious, tiresome and unbearable because "the act of waiting is itself a contradictory combination of doing nothing and doing something,"²⁴ reflecting the sloth, loneliness and the absurdity of the characters' miserable life. Moreover, the Poet expresses much sorrow at the absurdity of life when he metaphorically mentions that ships named "Justice, Friendship, The Golden Peace, Hope,"²⁵ sunk which means spiritual values are no more existed on this earth.

By mentioning people's suffering, the existence of man on this earth remains a mystery for Strindberg who considers life a puzzle and "No one has yet solved the riddle of life."²⁶ Besides, Strindberg in his play uses contradictions in which an aspect of a situation is completely different from other aspect and so makes the situation confused or difficult to understand as life is full of contradictions which are incompatible opposites such as life and death, love and hatred, dignity and humiliation, happiness and sadness, coldness and heat, body and soul, beauty and ugliness and so on in addition to the use of comic and tragic situations simultaneously when he makes spectators or readers of the play laugh at the Poet as he covers his body with mud and then he makes them pity him when they know that the Poet makes this just to avoid the gadflies' stings. The Poet finally realizes that life is a disastrous contradiction, generating confusion and tension respectively inside the mind, thus, in his poem he asks painfully "Why are we born like beasts/ We who are divine and human"²⁷

Conclusion

Apparently, one of the play's aims is to enhance the conditions of mankind when it suggests that suffering is a must for human beings. It is through suffering man can achieve his promising future. The play also glorifies death as a way of getting relief and achieving better eternal life and this is the very thing that pushes the Poet to say that "Surely suffering is redemption and death deliverance."²⁸ In fact Strindberg wants to say that suffering and death are inevitable realities in this mortal life and death is of a supreme importance for the human beings in the hereafter for the sake of getting rid of suffering. So, death can be considered a turning point to the superior real life as "death is an awakening to higher life."²⁹ Believing in this idea, the Daughter at the end of the play hurls her incarnation of the human body form into fire as "death is merely an awakening in the transcendental sphere."³⁰ Therefore, man should disdain the temporary joys of the materialistic world and follow the steps of the everlasting spiritual life.

No doubt that the human being is consisted of body and soul. The human body is created from clay which taken from the earth and it would sooner or later return to the earth when it dies. Many people believe that the soul continues existing after the death of the body. So, the body which arises from the worldly life has appetites, desires and other vital activities whose entertainments are temporal while the soul descends from the heavens and will ascend to heavens after the death of the body as many people think. It is believed by many people that heaven is imagined to be the

place where God lives, where righteous people go when they die, and where everyone is always happy. The heaven is usually imagined as being high up in the sky. Some religions recommend that the human being should be pious and virtuous through throwing away the worldly life and its temporal joys and selecting the path of the soul to the heavens which leads to the heavens where good people enjoy the happiness and immortality of life there. In his masterpiece, *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), the Irish playwright Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) confirms through the mouth of one of his protagonists called Mr. Hastings that “Love and content” are capable of achieving happiness for mankind when he asks his beloved Miss Neville to “Perish fortune. Love and content will increase what we possess beyond a monarch’s revenue.”³¹ It is clearly that Goldsmith is aware of the dangers of possessing material things which do not accomplish happiness and the only way is to apply the spiritual values such as “Love and content” which are capable of achieving happiness for mankind.

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