

Symbolism and Expressionism as the Stock-In-Trade of the Modern European Playwrights: A Brief Analysis

DR. C.Ramya

M.B.A, M.A, M.Phil, Ph.D, Asst. Professor, Department of English, E.M.G.Yadava College for Women, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract- This paper is an attempt to show how symbols are artistic invention to express sensuality by ideas, emotion and abstraction abolishing separation between internal and external world and how expressionism and symbolism have become as the stock-in-trade of the modern European playwrights.

Index terms- symbolism, expressionism, invention, idea, emotion, abstraction, separation, internal, external

INTRODUCTION

It is commonly understood that Symbols are artistic invention to express sensuality by ideas, emotion and abstraction. They abolish separation between internal and external world. "The effectiveness of a symbol is dependent on its concreteness and its power to stir deep feelings in the people concerned" (Gavin 85). Truly speaking, 'Symbolism is a major movement occurred in the field of theatre after the First World War. Modern dramatists make use of symbols drawing religious and esoteric traditions. Symbolism emphasizes the minor secrets of life through mood and suggestion without stressing on form. Sometimes, it sacrifices the content to preserve the style and manner of presentation. Symbolism also reflects on the inner emotional states through severe and distorted attacks on the senses. All these object to objective reality and use symbols to express subliminal and intuitive feelings.

Symbols which are older than dramas can be used in action. For example, the story of the play entitled *The Wild Duck* symbolizes a real animal which can be loved, brought up or killed. The final scene of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* is an illustration. The pathetic drug addict mother drags out the white wedding dress. This white object becomes a symbol, which makes her recollect her younger days. Genet's play *The Maids* uses visual

symbolism in dressing up. The psychology of the attitude of two-domestic servants to their mistress is brought out by Genet in the symbolic form of the charade of dressing each other up as their half-hated, half admired mistress. The only way left for them to kill their mistress is to kill her image and they resume their game. In the end, Claire drinks the pointed tea while Solange as Claire describes the Mistress' funeral. In the words of John Russel Taylore,

"the ritual act is the key to all Genet's drama, which is one of ritual dream and fantasy, in which realities are replaced by 'absurd' reflections they mirror" (P 107).

The symbolic manner in which the drama is enacted is more effective than the old method of realistic presentation. Genet wanted the play *The Blacks* to be performed before a white audience. Black actors impersonate both black and white. The court plays on a gallery surrounding the stage. The whole is backed by black cloth. A catafalque dropped in white cloth is placed downstage. Tension prevails between white audience and black actors. When the court laughs, it is echoed by even shriller laughter from the blacks. It is symbolic laughter. The manner in which these actions are shown makes the play acceptable. Clothes are used to express symbolism in a play. They act as an external force. According to Beckerman, "Brecht is, of course, demonstrating one of re-curent themes; the transformation of human being by the outside forces" (P 56). Brecht's *Galileo* is a good example. In the play, the former Cardinal Barberini is dressed in his papal robes. Pope does not intend to torture Galileo to secure a confession. But the Holy church is against his plan. The huge garments are piled on the Pope. With each garment, his resistance to the torture lessens. Finally, he is forced to agree with the cardinal. Pope does not interest with the garments heaped on him. Instead, there is a ritual determination

in the robbing. While presenting a play the inner secrets of life can be effectively presented symbolically.

Beckett's play *Endgame* portrays an old couple in a purely symbolic form. They are cast in dust –bias apart. Time to time, they pop heads up for air. The lips cannot quite reach in spite of their leaning over towards each other. The same type of visual symbolism is seen in Beckett's *Acts without Words*. A silent tramp sits on the stage and moves towards a tree. When he moves under the shade, it withers. A carafe of water comes down on a string. Whenever he makes a grab at it, it is jerked up out of his reach. When it stays down, he becomes too tired to lift his hand. These obvious symbols give a tenable view of human life. The play *All that Fall* by Samuel Beckett deals with the question of the possibility of a meaningful life for man in a meaningless world. The central forces are represented by aged Couple-Maddy who loves children while her husband Dan has them and even has killed. The sound of Maddy's dragging feet symbolizes the sufferings like age and decay which haunts the mankind. As Maddy moves, she hears a music which grows louder. Then it fades away as she walks on, humming the melody. In the words of Eugene Webb, "The music presents death as simultaneously an appealing escape and the destruction of possibility" (P 44). The symbolism of this music is very important to the play.

O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* symbolizes man, who has lost his old spiritual harmony with nature. Visually Yank and the other stockers don't look power. Yank does not belong to the Industrial workers of the world. He cannot go forward, and so he tried to go back. At last, he meets his own kind in a zoon; He shakes hands with the gorilla. But he cannot go back to 'belonging' either. The gorilla crushes him to death. The symbol of Yank as an ape receives increasing emphasis through the previous scenes. In the last scene of the play, the symbol is visually particularized. Arden's conflict between order and anarchy is reflected in *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*. The Nineteenth century Sergeant is haunted by an idea of old testament justice and military discipline. The killing of one soldier on Foreign Service resulted in the revengeful killing of five natives. Throughout the play, a precise balance is seen in the colour symbolism. Colours are emblematic and are limited

to black, scarlet and white. The visual contrast reveals a conceptual entry.

The symbolic parallels are abundant. The person's gown and Musgrave's Bible are black as the pitman and the coal field are. The coal-owner Major weaves a red government which resembles the robes of Musgrave and his squad. Musgrave's demonic Dance of Death beneath the skeleton, which he hoists on the town flag pole to signal the start of his revolutionary revenge, is set against the people's dance celebrating the lifting of his threat to society. Expressionism is a dramatic technique that seeks to perceive and represent the world around. It represents on the stage what happens inside a character's mind in response to external stimuli. An expressionistic play is anti-realistic. It is a kind of scripted dream, with the loss of character motivation and logical development of plot. In the expressionist dramas, characters lose their individuality. They are merely identified, by nameless designations like, "The Man", 'The Father', 'The Sun' and 'The Workman'. In an expressionist plot, plot and structure seem to be broken to incidents. In such a play, dramatic statements are found more effective than the dramatic conflict. The dialogue seems to be poetical. The atmosphere is vividly dreamlike and nightmarish. Distorted settings are used to communicate the real vision of life. To quote Christopher Innes, "In an extreme form, the expressionist action becomes a dream and Borchest sets his play in a visionary frame pointedly titled 'The Dream'. Stage directions describe Beckman as drunk with sleep, dreamlike', in trance Raunted' 'dazed' or 'in sleep'" (P 29). Borchest's Beckman is introduced, as simply a man' because from the expressionist point of view what defines people is what all have in common, the instinctive mind.

An expressionistic play focuses all the attention on the central figure while the others are impersonal and puppet like types rather than individuals. In O'Neill's *Hairy Ape*, yank has got all the significance of an expressionistic symbol. In the words of O'Neill, "Yank is really yourself and myself. He is every human being" (P 107). Yank is highly individualized. The expressionist theatre relies on mechanical gestures and identical repetitive stage directions. The *Hairy Ape* gives good instances. When the bell rings for the stoker to go on duty, their standing up. Coming to attention and going out in lock stop file is symbolic of the regimentation of men who are the

slaves of machinery. Similarly, the coal shoveling in the furnace room contributes to the rhythm which is a powerful factor in making anything expressive. The technique of Expressionism has become the stock-in-trade of the European modernist playwrights.

REFERENCE

- [1] Beckerman, Bernard Beckerman: Theatrical Presentation.
- [2] Gavin, M. Bolton. Towards a Theory of Drama in Education. England: Longman, 1979.
- [3] Frost, Anthony. Improvisation in Drama. Hound mills: Macmillan, 1990.
- [4] Taylor, John Russel. The Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre London: Methuen & Co, 1966.
- [5] Whiting, Frank. M. An Introduction to the Theatre New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954.
- [6] Webb, Eugene. The Plays of Samuel Beckett London: Peter Owen, 1972.