

The Ghost Sonata a Modern Note Hit on 20th Century World

Syed Basila Jehan

B.A Honours in English language and literature at Islamic University of Science and Technology , Awantipora , J and K

Date of Submission: 01-08-2020

Date of Acceptance: 15-08-2020

ABSTRACT: This paper concerns the modernistic attitude of Strindberg towards his play *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). August Strindberg is considered the most remarkable modernist who popularized the notions of Expressionism and Naturalism. His focus was on the individuals and their emotions. His plays delineated imperfections of humans and left a space for discovery of self and life. He fits in the idea of early modern writers whose works and language is based on "experimentation". Strindberg zealously explores his characters and delineates his own way of experimentation with plot and theme. Strindberg's chamber plays are of the utmost importance among which *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) stands out for its dreamlike plot and outrageous exploration of modern themes. The paper is divided into two parts – "Strindberg's Modern Aura in *The Ghost Sonata*" and "Strindberg – Writer who was ahead of his time". The first part focuses on the use of expressionist and naturalistic techniques by Strindberg in his play. Strindberg glorifies his work as an expressionist art by exemplifying names of his characters, focus on emotions of fear, horror and deception, depicting pessimistic side of life through sins committed by his characters, colors that assign attributes and unreal visualization of events. His naturalistic style differed from others due to which his writings were classified more as part of "super-naturalism". His naturalist domain covers the setting of play which is true to realism, the idea of man being responsible for his own actions and the tranquility of fittest in the struggle of life. The second part of paper tries to manage the persona of Strindberg as a writer whose work was far beyond his days. This segment discusses the presence of absurdity and existential crisis in the play, ideas which became popular in mid 1950s, way after Strindberg's death (that was in 1912). In *The Ghost Sonata* he discusses the nothingness

of being and how anxiety prevails in humans when they focus upon their helplessness of doing certain actions in life. Strindberg also focalizes on individuals and present their individual struggles and scuffles with existence. Overall, the whole narrative comes down to the following common features that are expounded by Strindberg in his work and that makes his play, *The Ghost Sonata*, a prolific piece of modern art - Irrationalism, distortion of reality, focus on subjectivity, abstract representations and outrageous commentary on human emotions. **KEY WORDS:** Chamber Play, *The Ghost Sonata*, Expressionism, Super-Naturalism, Existentialism, Absurdity.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Johan August Strindberg, born on the day when life itself is celebrated, 22 Jan 1849, is a colossal name in the figures of early modern writers. He kick started his career as a writer with *Red Room* (1872) and landed on the plane of enormous success. He flourished in the way of modern art and techniques, especially Naturalism and Expressionism and took them to another level. Strindberg is not found among the prominent legends of modernism but his artistic touch through various spheres - painting, poetry, prose and drama, let him find his significant place in the shallow modern universe.

Strindberg's plays foremost stories that recall the things that matters to him. The plot of his plays have essential events in them that narrate the psychological realities that are very significant on part of playwright. He integrated the passions, sins, sufferings and queries about human emotion and defined his boundaries of writing through them. His plays need a complete assessment to be done as they are involved in describing imperfect actions of humans.

The experiments in the field of literary work are evident in the line of Strindberg's work. He fits in the idea of early modern writers whose works and language is based on "experimentation". Strindberg zealously explores his characters and delineates his own way of experimentation with plot and theme. One such classic example of his endeavor is *The Ghost Sonata* (1907).

Ghost Sonata reflects Strindberg's idea of bringing together his best shots at modernistic techniques. The play surrounds a student who falls in love with the beauty of a house but later discovers the darkness lurking inside it. It shows a shift from a world of life to a world of death. Strindberg's refined depiction of reality that lies underneath the visible form of "reality" remains the highlight of his work.

This paper deals with the modernistic attitude of August Strindberg in his play *The Ghost Sonata* and will also throw some light on his techniques and his gigantic stature as a modernist who was ahead of his time.

II. STRINDBERG'S MODERN AURA IN THE GHOST SONATA:

In 1907 and 1908 at his own intimate theater Strindberg wrote 5 plays: *Thunder in the Air*, *After the Fire*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Pelican* and *The Black Glove*. Strindberg called these five highly original late works (from 1907) **chamber plays**. They focused to attain elusive states of being. Strindberg broke the walls between the living and the dead through these masterpieces.

Strindberg elucidated his best skills as a modernist in these plays especially in *The Ghost Sonata* by imploring **EXPRESSIONISM** and **NATURALISM** in the most prolific manner:

2.1 EXPRESSIONISM :

Art critic Wilhelm Hausentein in 1919 said expressionism is, form born out of deformation... form born out of imagination."

Thus, giving an idea that expressionist art focuses on the faculty of mind and the emotions concerned. In the play Strindberg touches the main aspects of this technique mainly through his characters. The naming of his characters - 'student' 'mummy' 'young lady' etc depict dramatist's inclination towards the characteristics of his characters rather than their real names. Strindberg like a true expressionist dramatizes human emotions over reality. He brings in notice emotions like fear, deceit,

hollowness, insanity, and aversion and allegorically represents its significance in the dialogue,

OLD MAN : Talk of what?-the weather, which we know? About each other's health, which we know? I prefer silence- then you can hear thoughts..." (p.28)

The preference of 'silence' by old man here refers to the preference of emotions by the dramatist as what is already out there needs not to be addressed anymore, but it's the innermost feelings that need vent.

Another important aspect of expressionism lies in the faith of being irrational and use of something unreal, as expressionist believe that the capacity of learning is always superior than being learnt. These two tenets collide in each other's meaning as what seems irrational, people tend to be believe it's unreal. Strindberg presents certain characters with unusual abilities of life, like in the form of **STUDENT** who is called a 'Sunday child' as he has the ability to see dead people and colonel's wife **MUMMY** who lives in a cupboard. These unusual events appeal to the rational mind of a modern man but on the cost of believing in being irrational.

The significance of color has a very important part to play in modernist literature especially in Expressionism. The colors of *Hyacinths* hold a set of qualities that promote and appeal to human emotions and feelings.

STUDENT: I love it above all other flowers – its virginal figure rising so slim and straight from the bulb, floating on the water and stretching its rare white roots down into the colorless nothingness. I love its colors: the **snow-white innocence**, the honey-sweet yellow, the **shy pink** of youth, the **ripe red**, but best of all the blue – the **blue** of deep-eyes, of dewy morning mist, of **faithfulness**. I love them all, more than gold or pearls. Have loved them ever since I was a child, have worshipped them because they have all the virtues I lack (**SCENE III**) (p.32)

Strindberg staunchly portrayed the pessimistic side of life in his work which eventually became one of the most significant feature in the world of expressionists. The incorporation of deaths, old man's deceitful nature, Mummy's attitude on giving up on life and the ending note of play propounds immense negativity on the part of plot, "STUDENT: You poor little child, child of this world of illusion, guilt, suffering and death; this world of endless change, disappointment, and pain." (p.42)

2.2 NATURALISM :

From years Expressionism has been pitted against Naturalism on the grounds of 'reality'. Though Strindberg emerged as a writer whose naturalistic plays are classified in a slightly different dimension of Naturalism called "Super-naturalism". The Ghost Sonata captures the essence of Naturalism by heavily distorting the realistic factors to achieve the mark of expressionism.

The setting of play gives a promising charisma of realism, for example,

"[SCENE 1] Outside the house. The corner of the facade of a modern house, showing the ground floor above and the street in front. The ground floor terminates on the right in the Round Room, above which, on the first floor, is a balcony with a flagstaff. The windows of the Round Room face the street in front of the house, and at the corner look on to the suggestion of a side-street running towards the back ." (p.1)

"[SCENE 2] Inside the Round Room. At the back is a white porcelain stove. On either side of it are a mirror, a pendulum clock and candelabra. On the right of the stove is the entrance to the hall beyond which is a glimpse of a room furnished in green and mahogany. On the left of the stove is the door to a cupboard, papered like the wall." (p.17). Thus giving a picture of realism in the unrealistic synonyms of world.

One of the prime attributes of Naturalism denotes that a man is responsible for his own actions as an individual is dictated by his nature. It is seen in the play that all the characters are linked to each other by one way or the other especially through the thread of a sin. In the second scene the old man is confronted by mummy who recounts him on his actions and says "... and in your crimes, you played the biggest part" (p.22). Also, when old man is in conversation at the 'ghost supper' with people who have spent their life tormenting each other, he says "... Nature herself has instilled in human beings a sense of blushing sense of shame ..." (p.28). Therefore, presenting an idea of how the actions of a human are determined by a natural force and one cannot help but dwell in the pond of shame for his actions.

Another fragment of Naturalism includes in it the notion of **social Darwinism** which delineates the role of life as a struggle where only fittest will eventually survive. The play revolves around a gloomy aroma where Strindberg brings in the notice of his audience the concept of a 'death screen', which implies

that many deaths have occurred and many will follow. Thus, referring to the elimination of people from the sight of life upon their indulgence in various sins and reaching an end. Student seems to be the only character who survives the sail of 'unreal and unusual' ship with full sanity and also holds onto his life and morals to sustain in a world full of deceptions and sufferings.

III. STRINDBERG WRITER WHO WAS AHEAD OF HIS TIME :

Apart from inducing some early modern techniques Strindberg also proves to be a writer who was way ahead of his contemporaries, as Eugene O'neil says he was "**the most modern of moderns**". His works reveal an asset of his writing that falls not only in early modern art but also tends to be derivative of many notions that followed in time. The representation of unrealistic elements in *The Ghost Sonata*, psycho-expressionism in *To Damascus*, closed space depicting existential crisis in *The Dance of Death*, all exemplify his stance as a writer who brought in the tenets of Existentialism, Absurdity and Expressionism in modern theater.

3.1 ABSURDITY AND EXISTENTIALISM :

Martin Esslin in his reading about the absurdist movement in the world of literature writes:

But the first to put on the stage a dream world in the spirit of modern

Psychological thinking was August Strindberg. The three parts of *To Damascus* (1898 - 1901), *A Dream Play* (1901), and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) are masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions, and direct sources of the Theatre of the Absurd."

The MUMMY in the play is the best source of absurdity for the audience. As BENGTTSSON says in the second scene "She thinks she is a parrot... whistle for us molly" (p.19), it brings out some sort of dark humor. A woman dressed like a mummy, is contemplating her 'being' in the cupboard. Also, in the following dialogues OLD MAN speculating about his illegitimate daughter says, "She has lost the desire to live, without knowing why..."(p.29) Thus depicting a design of life that has nothing to serve humans, a sense of hollowness. In the last scene STUDENT brings out the nothingness of life in light by saying, "This wretched earth aspires to be heaven... Damnation hangs over the

whole of creation- all that lives is damned...” (pp. 33-41)

The Ghost Sonata also proves to be a play that clicked some interesting pictures of existential crisis and brought the film of existentialism in the market. Jean Paul Sartre wrote in No Exit (1944), **Hell is other people.**” This idea can be clearly seen in the play, as its the people who are intertwined in sins and create havoc in each other’s lives. One of the chief principle of Existentialism says, **“Existence precedes essence.”** It is very well portrayed by the characters that they have become what they ought to be, as the STUDENT sings in his song “...Men must reap what they have sown.” (SCENE III) (p. 41) Also, Strindberg delineates the individual stories of his characters in an interesting way. The OLD MAN seems to have lived a life of deception on his own terms and hangs himself by the end out of his own shame and disgust. Similarly, the MUMMY who was once the most beautiful girl of her time ends up living in a cupboard after indulging in illegitimate sins. The other aspects of existentialism are prevalent in the form of anxiety and absurdity already discussed in previous topics. The MUMMY gives a beautiful ending note to the topic when she elucidates the imperfect nature of humans and says “We are wretched creatures - us human beings. We know that. We have erred, we have sinned - we like all the rest. We are not what we seem. For at the core we are better than ourselves , since we detest our sins ...”(SCENE II) (p.30)

IV. CONCLUSION:

The whole narrative comes down to the following common features that are expounded by Strindberg in his work and that makes his play, The Ghost Sonata, a prolific piece of modern art - Irrationalism, distortion of reality, focus on subjectivity, abstract representations and outrageous commentary on human emotions. The play overall focuses upon the congruity between isolated and alien world and is the most revived of Strindberg’s chamber plays as it delivers the audience with

the most dreamlike situations. It also proves to be the most meticulous in terms of expressionism and the vivid description of inner form of reality bring a new turn in the modernistic arts that followed.

WORKS CITED :

- [1]. Dahlstrom, E.W.L.”Origins of Strindberg’s Expressionism” Scandinavian Studies, vol.34,no.1,1962,pp.36-46.JSTOR, www.jstor.org/ stable/40916373. Accessed on 3 June 2020.
- [2]. More, Vijay. (2016). Existentialism: A philosophic stand point to existence over essence. <http://www.thesaarc.com/>. Vol III. 13-20. Accessed on 9 June 2020.
- [3]. Sage, Victor. Journal of Beckett Studies, no. 7, 1982, pp. 148–151. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/44782696 . Accessed 1 June 2020.
- [4]. Strindberg, August. The Ghost Sonata. Translated by Katarina Carlson, Patrick Scheid , Zach Trebino.2015.
- [5]. Szalczar, Eszter. “A Modernist Dramaturgy.” The Cambridge Companion to August Strindberg, edited by Michael Robinson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 93–106. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Accessed on 1 June 2020.
- [6]. Tornqvist, Egil. “Strindberg, The Ghost Sonata (1973).” Between Stage and Screen: Ingmar Bergman Directs, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 1995,pp.30-45.JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46mntz.6. Accessed on 3 June 2020.
- [7]. Tornqvist,Egil. “Prologue.” Strindberg’s Ghost Sonata, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2000, pp.9-16. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt45kfcc.4. Accessed on 3 June 2020
- [8]. Wilkinson, Lynn R. “The Chamber Plays.” The Cambridge Companion to August Strindberg, edited by Michael Robinson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009, pp. 107–120. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Accessed on 4 June 2020.



**International Journal of Advances in
Engineering and Management**

ISSN: 2395-5252



IJAEM

Volume: 02

Issue: 01

DOI: 10.35629/5252

www.ijaem.net

Email id: ijaem.paper@gmail.com