

On the Theme of Alienation in Broken Glass

Xun Wang

School of Literature, Sichuan Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 610000, China

Abstract: Modernity is an important philosophical trend of thought and alienation is closely related to modernity. Broken Glass is work of Arthur Miller of his late period, and its alienation phenomenon pervades throughout the text. This paper analyzes the alienation of Broken Glass from the perspectives of personal alienation, interpersonal alienation, and social culture alienation.

Keywords: Broken Glass; Arthur Miller Alienation Modernism

1. Broken Glass is a 90's play by Arthur miller.

In the American theater of the last century, Arthur miller occupied an important position. He was “the conscience of American theater.” “Broken Glass” is about a woman named Sylvia Gellburg, who suddenly loses the use of her legs. There’s obviously no physical reason for this. Nonetheless, the effects are undeniable. If the cause is psychological, however, what can its source be? Admittedly, she is obsessed by the news from Germany. In particular, she is transfixed by a newspaper photograph of elderly Jews forced to scrub the sidewalks with toothbrushes. But these events are taking place thousands of miles away. She herself is, ostensibly, safe. Why, then, can she not get the images out of her head? And why is she curiously happy unless because, as Miller has said, “it is as though something has settled now. She is a cripple. There is nothing she can do”. In the story, all kinds of people shine on the scene, interpersonal relationship is complex, personality conflict is fierce. Modernity and alienation can be perfectly interpreted from these characters.^[1]

Modernity was originally an abstract philosophical concept, which originated from Enlightenment thinkers. After continuous evolution and improvement, it formed an ideal blueprint. Modernity tried to fight against the ignorance and darkness of the Middle Ages. It’s full of passion. From its birth, it constantly sends messages of change to the world, promises rational solutions, and vows to bring humanity into a state of freedom. It can be seen that modernity and the birth of capitalism have the same origin. However, the development of capitalism did not carry the banner of rationality down. However, this historical process has greatly expanded instrumental rationality. Weber saw that in natural science, law administration and economic life, this seemingly rational but utilitarian rationality was expanding its institutional rule.^[2] The prominent manifestation of modernity is paying attention to efficiency and pursuing interests, which is mainly manifested as a kind of instrumental rational behavior. Extended reason causes the self to split, resulting in the “other and I” that already exist in itself. Self gradually lost, the external constraints and pressure around people make their own alienation.^[3]

2. Self-alienation

Alienation in Broken Glass pervades the whole text. The first is personal alienation. The alienation of man mainly refers to the alienation of man’s essence. The so-called alienation of man’s essence refers to the re-loss of man’s attribute acquired by man in the process of consistent transformation from animal to man. In Broken Glass, the heroine’s “not free” is a manifestation of alienation. Sylvia, as the protagonist, turns from an executive bookkeeper at the imperial steel company in long island city, New York, into a housewife. Sylvia loved her job, but after she quit her job, her professional identity was empty except for the empty title of “Mrs. Gellberg,” and the love of her husband and children became the focus and value of her life.^[4]

Gellberg is also a person who suffers from inner torment. As a Jew, he resented his ethnic identity. He appeared to know who he was, repeatedly correcting Dr. Hyman’s wife that her name was Gellberg, not Goldberg, and stressing that it was the only name in the phone book, in an attempt to deny his Jewish identity. Because Goldberg is a Jewish name that origins from German Gold (same fancy as in English) and Berg (mountain). One of the ornamental names featured by Jews who were forced to take surnames in 18th / 19th Century Germany. Many immigrants version from Germany in the two wars to escape the havoc to America. When Dr. Hyman’s wife Margaret mistakenly calls Gellberg as Goldberg, Gellberg reiterates the and patiently spells his name to its hearers, and keeps claiming that Gellberg is the only name in the phone book. Obviously, Gellberg is very nervous about the small mistake on the spell, because he does not want or he fears if anyone contacts his name with Jewish. When talking about the Jewish people who suffered a lot in German, Gellberg always indifferent.

3. The Alienation among People

In Broken Glass, interpersonal relationship is alienated. Human beings are born with the fact that communication is the basic

way of being. According to Marx, there is always a dual relationship between human and nature in the practice of human totality: the first is the relationship between human and nature, which contains the relevant structure of subject and object, showing human's reflection on the object from the symbolic level and the reshaping and creation of the object from the manipulation level. In the era of less developed rational understanding, the relationship between man and nature is more manifested as material production activities with the relationship between subject and object as the internal structure. The second is the interpersonal relationship, which contains the subject-subject structure, that is, the interaction, mutual exchange, mutual communication and mutual understanding among the living subjects, which is also the communication practice between the subjects.

The main reason of Silvia's paralysis is that no one understands her. She is very lonely. At first, she has a job which can show her worth and she is a businesswoman who will never be happy with staying at home, but her husband asks her to quit her job. Even after her paralysis, her husband doubts that she is doing this purposely so that she does not need to do the housework. And when he realizes that she is really paralyzed, he still does not understand the reason of her mental problem, but promises to her that he will help her to do the housework and he will teach her to drive, so that she can go everywhere. He does not know that she frightens him, just like Dr. Hyman says, "You hate yourself, that's what's scaring her to death. That's my opinion. How it's possible I don't know, but I think you helped paralyze her with this "Jew, Jew, Jew" coming out of your mouth and the same time she reads it in the paper and it's coming out of the radio day and night?". But even Dr. Hyman can not really understand Sylvia. Hyman is the only one who tries to understand Sylvia, and compared to the impotent Gelberg, Hyman is stronger, which gives Sylvia the hope of having someone who understands and helps her. She takes a step away from the bed and hysterically tries to get close to Hyman and the power he represents, but falls to the floor before Hyman can grab her. In the show, everyone thinks Sylvia is crazy, which alienates her from everyone.

4. The Alienation between People and Society

The development of the society creates conditions for human beings. But in modern society, the relationship between individuals and society is contradictory and even hostile. Capitalist society has become the limit of human development, the extreme pursuit of material interests has formed the values and social norms of modern capitalist society, and the morality, belief and education built on this basis have become the tools for rulers to suppress human nature. In modern society, the relationship between the individual and the society is contradictory, even hostile. Capitalist society has become the limit of human development, and the extreme pursuit of material interests has formed the values and social norms of modern capitalist society, and the morality, belief and education established on this basis have become the tools for rulers to suppress human nature.

In *Broken Glass*, the holocaust of Jewish people frightens all Jews, even people far from German. Sylvia's paralysis is after seeing a photo of old Jewish men who are forced to scrub the sidewalk with toothbrushes, and she identifies herself with those who are suffering from the persecution. She is frightened, and hopes to get help, so she cries, "This is an emergency! What if they kill those children! Where is Roosevelt! Where is England! Somebody should do something before they murder us all! (107)". But all of the world is indifferent with what is happening in Germany, and it is this kind of non-action and unsympathetic to other people's death that frightens Sylvia and causes her paralysis.^[5]

5. Conclusion

Broken Glass is a play that takes place in Brooklyn in the last days of November 1938, a time that America was just recovering from the Recession, and the holocaust was happening in Germany. In this time, a couple of Jews suffered from the pain of alienation from the individual, to the interpersonal relationship, and the cultural phenomena of the whole society. Having no way to escape from the power of alienation, Sylvia becomes paralyzed and his husband, Gellberg gets stroke.

References

-
- [1] Arthur Miller. *Broken Glass*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- [2] Bigsby, Christopher. *Arthur Miller: A Critical Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2005.
- [3] *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1997.
- [4] Tanya Tomasch. Evil as a Man-made Phenomenon: Denial, Humour and Sex In Arthur Miller's *Broken Glass*, *The Arthur Miller Journal*, 8. 2 (2013), 77-86.
- [5] Susan C. W. Abbotson. *Student Companion to Arthur Miller*. New York: Facts On File. 2007.