What Is Realism? Essay, Research Paper

W HAT IS REALISM? WAS ITS ARRIVAL GOOD FOR THEATRE?

Realism is the movement toward representing reality as it is, in art. Realistic drama is an attempt to portray life on stage, a movement away from the conventional melodramas and sentimental comedies of the 1700s. It is expressed in theatre through the use of symbolism, character development, stage setting and storyline and is exemplified in plays such as Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House and Anton Chekhov’s The Three Sisters. The arrival of realism was indeed good for theatre as it promoted greater audience involvement and raised awareness of contemporary social and moral issues. It also provided and continues to provide a medium through which playwrights can express their views about societal values, attitudes and morals.

A Doll’s House is the tragedy of a Norwegian housewife who is compelled to challenge law, society and her husband’s value system. It can be clearly recognized as a realistic problem drama, for it is a case where the individual is in opposition to a hostile society. Ibsen’s sympathy with the feminine cause has been praised and criticized; as he requires the audience to judge the words and actions of the characters in order to reassess the values of society.

The characters in A Doll’s House are quite complex and contradictory, no longer stereotypes. In Act II, Nora expresses her repulsion about a fancy dress worn to please Torvald (her husband): “I wish I’d torn it to pieces”; she attempts to restore it and resign herself to her situation right after: “I’ll ask Mrs Linde to help”.

In Act III, Torvald ignores his wife’s plea for forgiveness in order to make a moral judgement: “You’ve killed my happiness.You’ve destroyed my future”. “I can never trust you again.” Later on in the same act, he contradicts himself: “I’ll change. I can change-”; much after Nora confronts him: “Sit here, Torvald. We have to come to terms”. “?There’s a lot to say”. Here, Ibsen shows us he has worked in depth with the psychology of the characters, giving them a sense of complexity and realism. Playgoers therefore recognize the revelation of characters through memory. Thus drama became an experience closely impinging on the conscience of the audience.

Ibsen was also unique for his use of symbolism to assist realism on stage. Symbolic significance is presented through the detail of design, props and actions of the characters. For example, in Act III, Nora goes offstage to get changed; “I’m changing. No more fancy dress”. It is a symbolic representation of her personal change, one where she has come to the realization that she has been living the life of a doll, confined to the roles of a “featherbrain”, “plaything”, “dove”, “skylark” and “songbird”. Thus, symbolism enhanced realism, and its effect can be seen as positive in the sense that it stirred conscious awareness of values.

The stage settings of A Doll’s House are an integral part of the theatrical design, and not mere d?cor to be overlooked. The setting in Act II; “?the Christmas tree stands stripped of its decorations and with its candles burnt to stumps” is symbolic of the lack of happiness in Nora’s life at that moment. Also the change of setting in Act III; “The tables and chairs have been moved centre” foreshadows a character change that will take place in Nora. The many references to doors also have significance beyond the stage directions. The play begins with the opening of the door and finishes with the “slamming” of the door. Nora enters the doll’s house with the values of society and departs from it, symbolizing her rejection of them. All these intricacies of play settings and characters depict realism on stage. Ultimately, it has been good for theatre because it presents the playwright’s ideas in interesting and original ways. Realism, as expressed through symbolism, also draws the attention of the audience, thus stimulating moral thought, and stirring reaction.

Realism is also defined as art-imitating life (source). This is a fitting account of Anton Chekhov’s plays, for they tend to show the stagnant, helpless quality of Russian society in the late C19th. Quite evident in The Three Sisters, when Tuzenbakh illustrates realism; “The suffering we see around us these days – and there’s plenty of it – is at least a sign that society has reached a certain moral level.” Hence, while the portrayal of life here seemed ‘gloomy and pessimestic’, it was still good for theatre in that it presented issues which audiences could identify with. It was also more intellectual theatre when the playwright could express their views, compared with the conventional dramas that merely played out fiction.

Chekhov tends to portray people who are perpetually unsatisfied, such as Olga; “I felt my youth and energy draining away, drop by drop each day. Only one thing grows stronger and stronger, a certain longing.” (Act 1). This is reflective of Chekhov’s realistic character work, where people dream to improve their lives, but most fail. Realism here effectively presents harsh realities onstage, and not having to promote idealistic ways of life. Reality is difficult as Olga expresses; “What is all this for? Why all this suffering? The answer will be known one day, and then there will be no mysteries left, but till then, life must go on, we must work and work and think of nothing else.” (Act IV).

Chekhov also exposes human foibles and anti-social tendencies, such as with the character Natasha; “you have so many people here. I feel awfully nervous?I am just not used to meeting new people.” Thus, audiences can sympathize and identify with characters, as these traits are reflective of certain aspects of the human condition. So realism in theatre has been good in the respect that it has greater impact when there are elements of truth in the play.

In the final analysis, the arrival of realism has been good for theatre primarily because it promoted greater audience involvement. While the portrayal of realistic issues may have been contentious in some cases, such as in A Doll’s House, it nevertheless stirred reaction, which encouraged moral thought. However, one could argue that its arrival has lead to less use of the imagination. In either case, realism has raised awareness of social and moral issues and the playwright’s views serve to challenge the audience ultimately making theatre more interactive and interesting.