



## YEARNING FOR 'ONENESS AND WHOLENESS' AS A DOMINANT FEATURE OF SAROYAN'S LITERARY PERSONALITY: AN APPRAISAL

**Dr. S.Chelliah**

*Professor, Head & Chairperson, School of English & Foreign Languages, Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.*

### **Abstract**

*This paper focuses on the works of William Saroyan. He dazzled and entertained peoples through his works. Saroyan's exploration of art and its relationship with the process of becoming one's true self made the works to be filled with charm and which still touches the hearts of the readers. Through his plays it depicts how individual struggles to attain the fulfilled selfhood by passing the sufferings and disharmony of the world. Through the characters from his plays, he tried to bring out the better life. He shows more concern towards the family of humanity. Saroyan through his literary works he depicts the oneness and wholeness which each individual characters expects in his plays.*

**Key Words:** *Disharmony, Inner Self, Psychological Integration, Reality, Frustration.*

It is generally held that William Saroyan was a most promising early discovery of the theatre of nineteen-forties. Saroyan made his strange debut as a playwright in the spring of 1939 and prior to this, he was known as an original short-story writer. He was born of American parentage in Fresno, California. Being educated at a Fresno Grammar School he had developed the art of writing stories and reading voluminously and indiscriminately. Literary composition and playwriting became a matter of interest for him. As for playwriting, he tried some new style. A magnificent and unending drama in the most ordinary environments, events and people. In the words of John Gassner, "His world was a world of plain and poor people, broken-down houses, casualness, good health, poverty and uproarious laughter" (1016).

Eventhough copies of Ibsen's 'Ghosts' and of other plays were kept available to him, Ibsen drama did no longer influence his mind because it was too cagey, crafty and calculating. He liked Vaudeville much better. Like Vaudeville, Saroyan's plays were briskly spontaneous and improvisatory. A freedom from the reins of practical reality and normal logic characterized most of his works, a madcap fancy, combined with indefinable intimations, ran riot in them; and the plays, composed at incredible speed, sometimes gave the impression of having come from their author almost automatically. In this respect, Saroyan's plays can be called 'Surrealist' and they are, indeed, the best representation of this modern style in English-language drama. But Saroyan's writing was native and impulsive rather than borrowed and bared.

Saroyan was one among the first Americans to become comfortable with Surrealism. A decade prior to the dramatic compositions of Ionesco, Adamou and Beckett, he was found writing powerful absurd plays. Later on, he got closely attracted to Beckett and the Absurd Theatre because of his own techniques and dramatic vision. Perhaps the most significant aspect of Saroyan's growth as a writer was his exploration of art and its relationship to the process of becoming one's true self. One of his most powerful portraits of the artistic sensibility came out of personal experience – his meeting with Jean Sibelius in July 1935. In "Finlandia" from 'Inhale and Exhale', Saroyan contemplates the composer and the genius of his music:



“All I wanted was music. No dialectics. Just the simple old fashioned fury of one man alone, fighting it out alone, wrestling with God, or with the whole confounded universe throwing himself into silence and time, and after sweating away seven pounds of substance, coming out of the small room with something, detached, of itself, alive, timeless, crazy, magnificent, delirious, blasphemous, pious, furious, kindly, not the man, not all men, but a thing by itself, incredibly complete, an incision of silence and emptiness, and then sound and the shapes of things without substance. Music Symphony” (Calonne 29).

This neatly accounts for his attestation of the multiplicity of ambivalent characteristics of the humanity mundane. According to Saroyan, man’s hope is for meaning, which is everything and he achieves meaning, inventing it or discovering it through art. For him, as for Ninetzsche, art is the highest metaphysical activity of man, for it gives us a feeling of connectivity to power, meaning, truth, holiness – to the deepest hidden reaches of life’s mystery. The meaninglessness of the real world that is meaningful and the disorder of experience that is in order are precisely what he seeks to overcome, indeed, to redeem through art. Saroyan’s desire to achieve. Unification of the warring opposites of self and world through paratactic style illustrates his typically romantic attitude concerning the place of language in the transformation of consciousness. For him, it was impossible to express the fluctuating rhythms of selfhood in the typical language of his day. The Heraclitean flux of being cannot be transfixed; thus it is essential to invent a malleable and fluid style which renders the immediacy of life as experienced in the timeless moment. For Saroyan,

“a writer is great in so far as he is simultaneously artful and artless, a swift-moving inhabitant of both the inevitable and visible world and the uncreated but creatable, uncharted, invisible, fluid, limitless but nevertheless real other world.” (Calonne 33).

Although the world, the artist depicts is “uncharted” and “invisible”, it is nevertheless available to consciousness and must be poetically, lyrically invoked through rhythmic, musical language. It is thus that Saroyan became a literary god father to the Beat Generation and specifically to Jack Kerouac and his fellow writers. In his early prose, Saroyan was a true innovator and spawned a fresh new style which was a fusion of Jazz and of Whitman, the quick tempi of American life, popular songs and the oral tradition of American literature. It is precisely this oral, musical dimension of Saroyan’s prose-poetry, along with its emphasis on immediate and passionate experience that appealed so powerfully to the Beats. Literature for both Saroyan and the Beats should be as immediate, visceral, improvisatory and spontaneous as the experience of hearing great music. He emphasized that the writer’s task is to help both himself and his public attain inner wholeness:

“May be art is a correction of errors, within the artist,  
In the world, in man, in the Universe” (P 34).

When Saroyan turned seriously to the writing of dramas in 1939, he continued his search for self-realization in the modern world. In his plays like *My Heart’s in the Highlands* and *The Time of Your Life*, he sought to depict the deepest spiritual need of contemporary humanity – the desire to discover a way to live life meaningfully. The implicit question posed by his plays is:

“How might we best live in order to fulfill our most profound  
Potential as human being” (P 71).



In play after play, he did attempt to reveal the world as a place of mysterious beauty and pain in which the individual struggles for psychological integration. The process of achieving wholeness is rarely easy for his questing characters; as we could see, the plays gain their possibilities of fulfilled selfhood and the actual suffering and disharmony of the world.

Saroyan's creation of a fragile, fluid, dramatic universe full of strange, lonely, confused and gentle people started theatergoers accustomed to conventional plot and characterization. According to Heinrich Straumann, Saroyan's plays were like dramatized fairy tales without plots. He feels that the conflict between reality and imagination is solved by the absolute supremacy of the world of fantasy transforming everyday life into a succession of drama-like moments of kindness and joy. Yet it is simply not the case that the world of fantasy achieves 'absolute supremacy' in Saroyan's plays, rather, the play strikes a delicate balance between imagination and reality, one realm always subtly impinging on the other. Far from replacing reality with pure imagination, Saroyan repeatedly depicts the two realms in a state of dynamic tension.

The "two theatres", imagination and reality, the inner world and the outer world, are represented symbolically in the actual scenic design of his drama. In his successful plays, the inward life and the surface life are dramatically juxtaposed. For example, the poor families of *My Heart's in the Highlands* and *The Beautiful People* are enclosed within the fragile shelter of their homes, where they seek to affirm the values of love and beauty. In *The Time of Your Life*, lonely refugees from the world's unrest find a temporary home in Nick's Pacific Street Saloom, Restaurant and Entertainment Palace. These plays cannot be branded as "fairy tales". On the contrary, Saroyan sought to depict the difficult struggle of the sensitive individual yearning for a home in a constantly threatening and an increasingly hostile universe. The noisy chaos of "a culture near bankruptcy" is often heard rumbling at the periphery of Saroyan's delicately poised dramatic world – a real universe, indeed, in the Saroyanesque interpretation of the term.

Saroyan's first play *Subway Circus* (1935) was a collection of scenes conveying People's day dreams, connected only by the circumstance that the characters happen to be riding in the subway. Next in 1938, he dramatized his short story 'The man with the Heart in the Highlands' for William Kozlenko's *One-Act Play Magazine*, under the title *My heart's in the Highlands*. He completed his first full-length play, *The Time of Your Life* in just six days of furious writing. It was produced in the fall of 1939 by Eddic Dowling and The Theatre Guild, ran the greater part of the season in New York, toured extensively and won both Drama Critics Award and Pulitzer Prize. In the spring of 1940, Dowling and the Theatre Guild produced a second full-length play by Saroyan, 'Love's Old Sweet Song' a somewhat more conventional drama that brought name and income. In 1941, using the income, he earned from *The Time of Your Life*. Saroyan became a producer-cum-director of his own plays and gave New York the strangely beautiful, if somewhat chaotic, fantasy 'The Beautiful People'.

*My Heart's in the Highlands* is the simplest and perhaps the best example of Saroyan's style of playwriting. Except for a few maladroit passages, *My Heart's in the Highlands* been written in a single vein as a work of inviolable innocence. Though the author's innocence does not exclude the realities of poverty and of old age, the play is a paean to man's impulsive love of beauty, to kindness and dignity among the obscure, and to the wondering faith that children reveal. The play is sentimental without apology and optimistic without reason – attributes which, incidentally, Saroyan would claim for the greater part of the human race. The play expresses a diffuse Whitmanesque spirit, a poetic caprice that



requires no more explanations than does the taste of food and drink. Nothing and everything is in this play. The thoughts uttered by the characters are less important than those they do not or are unable to put into words. The play is liked in so far as it is experienced; it is disliked in so far as it is not experienced. It has the subjective, dreamlike unreality of the earlier plays. It is life viewed through childlike eyes, and all the characters partake of childish qualities; it is wish – fulfillment objectified – if only life could be such a fairy-tale world where the neighbours and the grocer and all other produce food in order to feed the old actor who plays haunting melodies on his bugle. The world is responsible for feeding its artists and givers of beauty, the symbolism declares. The preoccupation with food in this play might be interpreted by a psychoanalyst as an “oral regression”. Curiously enough, Saroyan is said to have objected to the stylization of the Group Theater Production and defunded the play’s realism. After the critical acclaim for *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, Saroyan is purported to have turned out his first full-length play, *The Time of Your Life*. This play contains much original characterization and compassion for the frustrations of the common man and woman.

In his San Francisco Waterfront dive, Saroyan assembles an ingratiating collection of humanity: Joe is a man with unlimited financial resources who gives away money to help people find happiness; his slow-witted friend, Tom, is, like Steinbeck’s Lennie, a child-man; Kitty-the prostitute, is “one of the few truly innocent people” and the police man hates the police force but doesn’t know what else to do; there is an Arab who mutters, “No Foundation. All the way down the line”, and there is a pin-ball maniac, a pathetic Vendevillian who can’t make people laugh, a philosophical longshoreman, a kindly bartender and a herd of other assorted tragic-comic figures. There is a bare minimum of plot, which consists of Tom’s mute love for Kitty and Joe’s efforts to help them find a better life. Blick, a Sadistic vice-squad officer, has been hounding the prostitutes and when he would arrest Kitty, he is mercifully killed by a wonderfully loquacious old coot named Kit Carson. *The Time of Your Life* is pervaded by Saroyan’s dream of innocence, his sentimentalized feeling that the little people are spiritually beautiful. The childish wish-fulfillment again prevails – Joe is a magic of all good, a father – image if not *The Father*. Joe illustrates through his actions the theme of the play, stated at the beginning in an eloquent stage direction:

“In the time of your life, live – so that in that wondrous time, you shall not add to the misery and sorrow of the world, but shall smile, to the infinite delight and mystery of it” (Three Plays, 15).

All ends happily with Saroyan condoning murder if necessary to prevent people from adding to the misery of the world. In his orientation towards reality, Saroyan has not again approached *The Time of Your Life* but instead has gradually returned to the surrealistic, subjective style of the one-acts but with a deepening cynicism. *Love’s Old Sweet Song* is a rather smart-aleck satire on the oakies and on young radical writers who want to dramatize them.

*My Heart’s in the Highlands*, like the best of Saroyan’s any other tale, combines a tone of wide-aged freshness with the sureness of hind sight. Saroyan simple glimpses a few human beings, and evokes from them moods and situations of compelling emotion. He manipulates the theatre as frankly as a musician pulling out the sob-stops on the Music Hall Organ. The meaning of the play is the meaning of reality itself. The play is as real as a street corner, as natural as the earth or sidewalk underfoot, the sky overhead. As for the message and moral of the play, it is the simplest and oldest in the world:



“It is better to be a good human being than  
To be a bad one. It is just naturally  
Better” (Three Plays, 15).

The point made by the play *My Heart's in the Highlands* is the old anti-philistine insistence; that worldly success means nothing, that artistic failure means nothing, that what alone matters is man's vaulting imagination, his perdurable dream, the spiritual geography of his heart. On this theme, Saroyan has composed the freest of fantasies introducing rumbling chords of social protest, screwy dissonances, gaudy trills, touching pianissimos, mushy rubatos. Violently anti-intellectual, Saroyan relies not an ordered thought but on a kind of surrealist association of words and moods. It is far too often soft, like a slushy Chopin nocturne; seeking to evoke something, never mind what; to bring tears to the eyes, never mind why. Though Mr. Saroyan has leaped through no store windows with a shy bathtub, he is a surrealist playwright whose *My Heart's in the Highlands* could be compared favourably with a fur-lined tea cup. With a miracle-play simplicity of setting and development, it makes a pleasant experience because of its sunny stretches of life among nice people. As Brooks Atkinson has so aptly worded, the play is

“A prose poem in ragtime with a humorous and  
Lovable point of view” (P 338).

The purest statement of Saroyan's optimism occurs in *My Heart's in the Highlands*, which fact the author unabashedly has admitted to be a classic. A close view of the play will reveal the charm and novelty of his fantasy. The play addresses the agony of alienation and spiritual hunger from a more serious perspective. The play's stage directions place greater emphasis on the isolation and poverty of the family's house:

“An old white, broken-down, frame house with a  
Front porch, on Son Benito Avenue in Fresno,  
California. There are no other houses nearby,  
Only a desolation of bleak land and red sky” (27)

In addition, the first scene opens with the lonely cry of a train whistle in the background. The setting thus evokes a mood of sadness, yearning and tender melancholy. The implication that spiritual turmoil and the longing of the human heart can be stilled only through death becomes a powerful theme in the play. Death pervades the play. Johnny's mother and the parents of Henry, the newspaper boy, have passed away. Furthermore, the threat of World War II hovers over the play, and Ben Alexander rages against the triumph of death over life. War represents the ultimate destruction of humanity's hope for spiritual wholeness and integration. Yet if the race is to survive, the quest for brotherhood must not be abandoned. That Saroyan saw *My Heart's in the Highlands* as yet another formulation of his central theme is clear from the play's preface:

“The imperative requirement of our time is to restore  
Faith to the mass and integrity to the individual.  
The integration of man is still far from realized”



Hence, Saroyan attempts to affirm the possibility of a better life through his characters and appreciably exhibits himself as an author for self-affirmation and individual complacency. Though the story centers around a specific family, Saroyan's ultimate concern is with the family of humanity. It is symbolic of the unity of mankind. Typically Saroyan's imagination moves progressively outward, from the individual self, to the family, to the entire world. The whole personal quest for wholeness means nothing if humanity itself doesn't get integrated. This yearning for oneness, for unification of the self with the pulsing body of the world is a dominant feature of Saroyan's literary personality.

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