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# Expressionism in American Literature

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**ABSTRACT:** Until the post-World War I era, American literature, confronted with religious hostility and then by economic necessity and academic indifference, struggled to come into its own as a respected literary genre at home and as a force that made itself felt on foreign stages. A commonplace of American literary history is that the plays of Eugene O'Neill, in Walter J. Meserve's words, marked "America's full-scale arrival into the modern literature of western civilization." In an article in a 1907 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, John Corbin quoted Edmund Stedman, who proclaimed a literary declaration of independence for American literature: "Quote boldly, then, I prophesy the dawn of the American literature; and quite confidently, too, for the literature has already dawned." Expressionist playwrights tried to convey the dehumanizing aspects of 20th-century technological society through such devices as minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals. Notable playwrights who wrote expressionist literatures include Ernst Toller and Georg Kaiser (German), Karel Čapek (Czech), and Elmer Rice and Eugene O'Neill (American). The 20th cent. also saw the attempted revival of literature in verse, but although such writers as William Butler Yeats, W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and Maxwell Anderson produced effective results, verse literature was no longer an important form in English. In Spanish, however, the poetic literatures of Federico García Lorca are placed among the great works of Spanish literature.

**KEYWORDS:** literature, American, expressionism, characters, century, English, foreign

## I. INTRODUCTION

Three vital figures of 20th-century literature are the American Eugene O'Neill, the German Bertolt Brecht, and the Italian Luigi Pirandello. O'Neill's body of plays in many forms—naturalistic, expressionist, symbolic, psychological—won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1936 and the existentialist literatures of Jean-Paul Sartre, in the realistic and symbolic literatures of Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Jean Anouilh, and in the surrealist plays of Jean Cocteau. Indicated the coming-of-age of American literature. Brecht wrote literatures of ideas, usually promulgating socialist or Marxist.[1,2]The wachowski brothers allows the viewer to see how reality and illusion can be mistaken for the other, using a number of contrasting ideas found in Plato's analogy of the cave, showing that at times the dream world can be safer than real life the matrix is a simulation that creates an imaginary world where people are prisoners from reality, much like Plato's mythological the caves. the cave holds prisoners inside a dark cave, chained in way prohibiting them from turning their heads ,only able to see is a wall that displays images of what appears to be of people or animal passing behind them these reflections or images are all the prisoners know of the world outside cave. They see only what the marionette players want them to see projections of objects that are not real but seem real because they have never seen them the real world people in the matrix only see what the machines shadow, making it difficult to wake up from a continuous dream show, trapped in an illusion world .[3] Expressionism is unquestionably one of the more significant early-twentieth-century artistic isms, exerting enormous influence on the shape and scope of creative expression in the West, including the practice and theory of literature. The received narrative of expressionism is that it had its genesis in the graphic arts in Paris in the first years of the century; quickly made its way to Germany via arts criticism early in the second decade; was, in turn, applied by German critics, editors, and historians to describe the work of a loosely connected though never formalized group of artists, including notable literature artists; and was eventually replicated (though not necessarily enhanced in any discernable way) by a handful of artists working in the United States during the 1920s. Hence, the practice of expressionism in America typically is situated as something of a minor, albeit fascinating, splinter of the better-known European movement. Even those few critics who have offered focused studies of American expressionism—most notably Mardi Valgema's *Accelerated Grimace* (1972)—situate it as essentially linked to and entirely derivative of the better-known German movement. In her fine study, Julia A. Walker[4,5] convincingly counters this often-rehearsed narrative, suggesting instead that "American expressionism . . . is not simply a minor derivation of the better known German movement, but a complicated artistic response to the forces of modernization" (2). In light of this view, Walker poses her primary research question: "What if [American expressionist playwrights] were not directly influenced by German expressionism in the writing of their plays?" (5). For Walker, then, while German and American expressionism share certain traits—"the stylized presentation of the subjective inner world, compressed syntax, exaggerated caricatures, and episodic action" (4)—such parallels should not be taken as indisputable verification of the German form as the only or even the principal influence on the development of the



American. Instead, by way of a nuanced consideration of the larger American cultural field, Walker works to position the expressionist literature in America as essentially related to the anxiety many turn-of-the-century Americans felt regarding the forces of modernization. Additionally, she persuasively argues that those American playwrights working in the expressionistic mode were largely responsible for establishing a space in America for literatoretic modernism. They did so, Walker contends, by challenging the status of playwrights as fundamentally connected to the traditional modes of theatrical production—particularly the view that their art was created to support actors—and modeled instead a conception of the playwright as an independent artist who composed autonomous works of literatoretic literature. At the heart of Walker's argument regarding the autonomy of American expressionism is her locating of the now nearly forgotten expressive culture movement as the chief motivation in the development of the art form. In view of this, in the first part of her study Walker maps the development and achievements of this movement, noting how this wide-ranging and broadly practiced program of reform, which placed the performing arts as the primary method for opposing the alienating conditions of modernity and modernization, exerted its influence on the larger culture.[6,7] This program of de-alienation, so central to the expressive culture movement, drew upon the "whole body" and "three languages" processes of François Delsarte, as refined and interpreted by American speech educator S. S. Curry and his various progeny. The advocates of the expressive culture program sought to recalibrate and unify the three languages of the body—verbal, vocal, and pantomimic—as part of a larger effort to reinvest communication, now atomized through the proliferation of inanimate communication technologies, with human integrity. In the three chapters that constitute part one of her study, Walker deftly uses as her organizing principle these three performative modes of expression to systematically analyze how "Bodies," "Voices," and "Words" were disarticulated and resignified by technological and cultural forces.

## II. DISCUSSION

An exaggeration or distortion of surface reality to depict an inner truth. Expressionism is an artistic style in which the artist attempts to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse in him. He accomplishes his aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements. In a broader sense Expressionism is one of the main currents of art in the later 19th and the 20th centuries, and its qualities of highly subjective, personal, spontaneous self-expression are typical of a wide range of modern artists and art movements.

Expressionism itself was never a concerted or well-defined movement, no one individual connected with expressionism wrote a program or offered a theory that was binding for the entire "movement," one work in particular exerted a powerful influence on many artists.

It can be said, however, that its central feature is a revolt against the artistic and literary tradition of realism, both in subject matter and in style.

The expressionist artist or writer undertakes to express a personal vision—usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision—of human life and human society. This is done by exaggerating and distorting what, according to the norms of artistic realism, are objective features of the outer world, and by embodying violent extremes of mood and feeling. Often the work implies that what is depicted or described represents the experience of an individual standing alone and afraid in an industrial, technological, and urban society which is disintegrating into chaos.

Expressionist painters tended to use jagged lines to depict contorted objects and forms, as well as to substitute arbitrary, often lurid colors, for natural hues. These artists used the expressive possibilities of colour and line to explore literatoretic and emotion-laden themes, to convey the qualities of fear, horror, and the grotesque, or simply to celebrate nature with hallucinatory intensity. They broke away from the literal representation of nature in order to express more subjective outlooks or states of mind.[8,9]

They used jagged, distorted lines; crude, rapid brushwork; and jarring colours to depict urban street scenes and other contemporary subjects in crowded, agitated compositions notable for their instability and their emotionally charged atmosphere. Many of their works express frustration, anxiety, disgust, discontent, violence, and generally a sort of frenetic intensity of feeling in response to the ugliness, the crude banality, and the possibilities and contradictions that they discerned in modern life.

Expressionism sets out to achieve the greatest possible degree of expressivity. It is not beauty that dominates but emotion. The deformation of the image of nature to reflect intense expression and the use of strong colours are characteristic of expressionist painting.

What is Expressionism? First of all, what it is not:

–It is not Impressionism which seeks to capture transient nature at different moments, to reflect the diversity of the physical world. The impressionist expresses certain things without the intervention of the mind. Impressionist art



records momentary impressions, of landscapes, buildings, parks. Monet painted a church at various moments of the day, each time producing a different painting.

Unlike Impressionism, its goals are not to reproduce the impression suggested by the surrounding world, but to strongly impose the artist's own sensibility to the world's representation. The expressionist artist substitutes to the visual object reality his own image of this object, which he feels as an accurate representation of its real meaning. The search of harmony and forms is not as important as trying to achieve the highest expression intensity, both from the aesthetic point of view and according to idea and human critics.

–It is not Naturalism which records “life as it is” & photographs everyday reality. Naturalistic art is grounded in a working-class milieu, in gritty and squalid environments. Naturalist plays often are written in dialect (e.g. Georg Hauptmann's *The Weavers*) and are reflective of a deterministic world view, bearing the marks of Social Darwinism.

The expressionist believes the world is there for everyone to see. It would be absurd to reproduce the world purely and simply as it is. Expressionism seeks neither the momentary appearances nor things in their everyday countenance, but rather the essence of things, the eternal or abiding meaning of facts and objects, the deeper reality behind surface appearances. Expressionists do not see; they have visions. Appearances are only a semblance, claims the expressionist; we must transcend the superficial guise of reality to find true meaning.

The expressionist seeks an object's most expressive aspect. Reality is not something “out there,” but rather the creation of minds—and wills.

We people of today are expressionists. People who want to shape the outside world from within themselves. The expressionist is building a new world within him... a new macrocosm. A world of its own. Expressionist sense of the world is explosive. It is an autocratic sense of being oneself.[10,11]

Thus, emphasis was not to be placed on “observation of visual details” but on “visionary experiences”. As Van Gogh wrote in letter: “Because instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcefully.... I should like to paint the portrait of an artist friend, a man who dreams great dreams, who works as the nightingale sings, because it is his nature. He'll be a fair man. I want to put into the picture my appreciation, the love that I have for him. So I paint him as he is, as faithfully as I can, to begin with. But the picture is not finished yet. To finish it I am now going to be the arbitrary colorist. I exaggerate the fairness of the hair, I get to orange tones, chromes and pale lemon yellows. Beyond the head, instead of painting the ordinary wall of the mean room, I paint infinity, a plain background of the richest, intensest blue that I can contrive, and by this simple combination the bright head illuminated against a rich blue background acquires a mysterious effect, like the star in the depths of an azure sky” .

Substituting definition for description, Herbert Read called expressionism an art seeking to reproduce “not the objective reality of the world, but the subjective reality of the feeling which objects and events arouse in us” :Renouncing any claims to universal beauty, Kandinsky states that “internal beauty is achieved through necessity and renunciation of the conventionally beautiful”.

As far as painting is concerned, expressionism emerged as a reaction to impressionism and the academic style of the age. From an historic point of view, the creation of The Bridge movement can be considered as the beginning of expressionism in the fine arts.

### III. RESULTS

The need to express a modern voice against an outmoded way of life led the Expressionists to break with the Old Order. In 1892 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (founder of the Brücke group) viewed the Munich Sezession Movement exhibition of Impressionist and Post Impressionist paintings. He felt that their content and execution were insignificant. It was then (1900) that he decided German art needed a different direction, modern visual communication.

The artists in the Brücke group found their stimulus from life and experience. They strove for personal expression, an artistic oneness, and soul-searching that liberated content from its constrictive mode. They enforced a revolutionary idealism and sought “a new culture of man as the basis of true art” .

Most painted in an abstract manner in reaction to traditional Realism, voicing their discontentment with the spiritlessness found in contemporary society. Edvard Munch, analyzed the inner turmoil, conflicts, and extreme states of awareness in his paintings. His *The Cry* is the epitom of the style.

By looking inward the Expressionists were able to scrutinize and express artistically their idiosyncrasies, cast-off antiquated perspectives, and obtain aesthetic fulfillment (life and beauty of spirit).



They sought liberation from conventional artistic trends through a psychological penetration into human consciousness. A majority used aesthetic expression as an outcry against the petrified formality of traditional styles. Others confronted the inner unknown, and reacted against their dissatisfaction with the world.[12,13]

Self-expression was the Expressionistic ferment for pure abstraction. Mystical-spiritual unity, man's autumnal awakening, and the struggle for social justice would be issues examined in their works. Kandinsky felt that absolute freedom for the artist produced spirituality and salvation.

The intensity of color was transferred to canvas by frayed nerves exhibiting an ugly reality. The , and explosion of sensation Van Gogh wrote his brother Theo: "Instead of trying to render exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily in order to express myself more powerfully"

Van Gogh used yellow (his favorite hue) and blue as his primary colors; these colors would advance and vibrate from his canvas. Kandinsky and Marc used these primary colors to transcend everyday visual communication. Brightened by the influence of light, yellow became relaxed, hopeful, a guiding light while violet or gray dissipated into darkness .

Both Van Gogh and Gauguin felt that human emotions could be expressed through color; it gave their work symbolic meaning, the ideal state where man and nature were one. The Expressionists were motivated by the idea of colors and emotions being interrelated and the use of color to relate spiritual or mystical concepts.

Modern psychological studies have shown that colors do influence and affect our emotional states in response to size, distance, space, and temperature. The Expressionists would take color and light values beyond the established order, which showed mystical- modernity as a new era had begun.

Wassily Kandinsky founded a school known as the New Artists Alliance, Munich. Kandinsky used primary colors (under the influence of Van Gogh) like blue and yellow, and secondary colors like orange and green, a "choir of colors," to project the tangible unity found in man. Certain colors held vivid meanings which strengthened a painting's individuality, a unique "language of color and content." His emotional sequence ran as follows.

emotion [in the artist] > the sensed > the art work > the sensed > emotion [in the observer]

Expressionists were able to infuse a manipulation of the senses through their abstract works. Kandinsky stated: "The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so that it can weigh colors on its own scale and thus become a determinant in artistic creation". Kandinsky was an innovator who recognized and expressed the importance of color and abstraction's ability to evoke a multitude of reactions. Later in his career, color momentum and spiritual insight would become non-representational (in 1910, at forty-four years of age).

#### The Creators: The Brücke and Blaue Reiter Schools

The Brücke (Bridge) group was founded in 1905 in the city of Dresden by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, a former architectural student turned painter. Other members included Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, and later Emil Nolde. From the beginning they rejected traditional academic sterility and social injustice. Their art form was aggressive, spontaneous, often violent—which coincided with the times.

They wanted their art to reflect an avant-garde interpretation, and to create a radically modern art form that disclosed the decline of an age. The artists in the Brücke group felt that man must strive for a higher existence beyond convention, and secularism.[14,15]

Kirchner's paintings were flat, two-dimensional color areas with vertical-diagonal lines (symbolizing the infinite), elongated figures that were round in the belly with narrow legs (Medieval influence), and furioso brush strokes that expelled "emotional impact" . Primitivism, with its uncorrupted simplification, held great appeal for the Expressionists. In his oil paintings, Kirchner blended red with purple, black with purple, and blues and greens with purple, associating purple with spirituality. In the Catholic Church violet or purple had always been identified with the Passion of Christ. Kirchner stated, "My goal was always to express emotion and experience with large and simple forms, and clear colors" .



The Brücke group sustained their struggle within in order to inspire a pure identity and spontaneity of expression. Both were intent on preserving their improvisation and originality in form and color. Kirchner wrote in his diary in 1923: "Uncomprehended for the most part, and totally distorted; for with us [the will] shaped the form and gave it meaning".

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Eventually the Brücke group grew apart; and after eight years of working together, in 1913 their dissolution was announced ending a remarkable legacy of artistic emotion. The Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) School was formed in the city of Munich by Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian law student who had left Moscow to study art in Germany. Kandinsky and Franz Marc held the first Blaue Reiter Exhibition on December 18, 1911, at the Modern Thannhäuser Gallery.

From the beginning, individualism, instead of co-working, was evident among the various artists. The name Blaue Reiter held a significant spiritual and romantic relationship. The color blue exuded a transcendent spirituality and was associated with the German Romantic poets who had influenced the Expressionists. Secondly, the iconography identified with The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—famine, pestilence, war, and death—reflected the confusion of the times in their works. Kandinsky wanted to express something more sacred: he felt art was the life of the spirit and should communicate to the soul through subjective colors like blues and oranges.

Their works were not based on objective reality and were meant as a salvation for humanity, a response against industrial expansionism, nationalism, and disenchantment. They wanted the public to adopt an imaginative interpretation [16,17]

"If Expressionism at the moment behaves in an ungainly, violent manner, its excuse lies in the prevailing conditions it finds...we ourselves have to become barbarians to save the future of humanity from mankind as it now is. As primitive man, driven by fear of nature, sought refuge within himself, so we too have to adopt flight from a 'civilization' which is out to devour our souls... [18] [Expressionism is] a tocsin of alarm given out by all panic-stricken souls." Hermann Bah

Trend that influenced literature, as a revolt against realism and naturalism, and aimed to show the inner state of the subject. Not through psychological realism which rendered the subject giving the illusion of actual experience but through direct expressions of thoughts, above all, emotions. [19,20]

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